THE 47-MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

H. G. Gunther

Y5677/$1.95/A JOVE BOOK

THEIR PASSIONATE SECRETS WERE LOCKED AWAY—
UNTIL DESTINY THRUST THEM TOGETHER...

PRIVATE HELL

SHE WAS A GOLD VISION.
THE DEVIL IN DISGUISE.

He rose and walked stiffly toward the girl. She retreated, step by step, as he approached; she was making for a shed where the gardening tools were kept.

She slipped into the toolshed just ahead of him, and welcomed him in with open arms, hands clinging around his neck; she kissed him with the ferocity of a hungry beast of prey, pressing him back against the rotting planks of the wall.

"I've been waiting for you . . ." she whispered, her sharp little teeth nibbling his lips and neck. The feel of it drove him wild. . . . "I've been waiting for four days," she whispered. "I knew you'd come . . . I knew! I love you, I love you . . . people can tear each other apart for love, did you know that? Like cannibals . . ."

Also by H.G. Gunther
from Jove

THE DESERT DOCTOR
DOCTOR ERICA WERNER
THE RAVISHING DOCTOR
SUMMER WITH DANICA

H. G. Gunther

PRIVATE HELL

A JOVE BOOK

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Originally published in Germany under the title Privatklinik

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English translation © 1979 by Aidan Ellis Publishing
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First Jove edition published March 1981

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Jove books are published by Jove Publications, Inc.,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

1

They were standing outside the iron factory gate, waiting. They stood there every Friday, always stationing themselves just to the left of the porter's lodge, where they had a good view of the factory's main thoroughfare, and the crowds who came pushing their way out of the gate when the shift changed.

They were holding hands, as if for mutual support and encouragement. Every Friday, as the electric clock over the porter's lodge moved around to five, their hearts stood still and their young faces hardened, looking much older than their slight bodies.

The porter blew his nose, glancing at the time-check clock by his keyboard. One of the factory guards was sitting in the lodge with him, smoking a pipe. "Couple of nice kids," commented the guard. "Come to meet their Dad off shift—you don't see that so often nowadays, Karl."

Clearing his throat, the porter looked through the big window of his lodge at the factory buildings. Any moment now the hooter would go, gates and doors would open, people would come thronging out. And one of them would be Peter Kaul, electrician, from Building Four. A quiet, inconspicuous man, the average man in the street, everything about him ordinary: his face, his clothes, the way he walked, the way he spoke and thought and worked. A tiny cog in the big wheel of the world.

"You don't know 'em?" asked the porter, putting his handkerchief away.

The guard shook his head. "Know who?"

"Those kids."

"No . . . been on Gate Five till yesterday. What about them, then?"

"They're Peter Kaul's kids. So maybe you don't know him—you soon will! Then you'll see why I give those two a dollar now and then. Know what they do? They chase straight off to the grocery store, buy themselves a bit of black pudding. Pathetic, mate, that's what it is."

The guard looked out of the large window at the two children standing to one side of the big iron gate. They were watching the electric clock. The hand jerked forward . . . five more minutes and the hooter would go, Daddy would come out, it would all be the same as every other Friday. They squeezed hands, smiling at each other. Cheer up, Petra, thought Heinz, I'm here too! Cheer up, Heinz, thought Petra, we're helping Mummy.

"You mean they're hungry?" said the guard. "How come? Electricians earn good money, Karl!"

"You just watch!"

The hooter went, above the main building. Seventeen hours: the shifts were changing. Workers came crowding out of Building One, nearest the gate, a turbulent, rushing river of heads and bodies. Petra and Heinz stood aside from the stream of people and drew closer together. They were thin and pale, with large eyes in faces older than their years.

"Will he be . . . like that again?" Petra wondered.

Heinz nodded. "Sure to be."

The porter nudged the guard. "That's him, coming now. In the grey suit. Got a red tie on, and a briefcase under his arm. See him?"

The guard leaned forward. Among the hurrying crowd he saw a man, head held high, gaze rather fixed, making for the gate. The porter sighed and pushed his cap to the back of his head. "Blind drunk again!" he said, disgusted.

The guard turned in surprise. "He's walking straight enough!"

"That means he's had a skinful. Look at his eyes, will you? Friday being pay day, he really goes to town."

"You mean those kids . . ."

"His missus sends 'em." The porter shrugged his shoulders. "Hopes they can put a brake on her old man. Never works, though . . . he drinks over half his pay every Friday, regular as clockwork. Mind you, he won't get the sack, first on account of the wife and kids, second, he's still a good electrician.

Drinks like a fish, but he's a good worker. Now, watch this!"

Peter Kaul had passed through the gate and seen his two children. His face twisted into an unpleasant smile.

"My bodyguard, eh?" he said. "The escort party! Mrs. Kaul's police force! What's the idea?"

Heinz and Petra held hands even tighter. Heinz, younger by two years than his twelve-year-old sister, tried to smile back at his father.

"Hullo, Daddy," he said.

"Bug off." Peter pushed his briefcase under his arm, reached into his back trouser pocket for a flat bottle the size and shape of a hip flask, put it to his mouth and drank its contents; it had been a quarter full. The children watched, wide-eyed, as the clear liquor disappeared down their father's throat. His Adam's apple jerked as he swallowed. When the bottle was empty, he tossed it away on a heap of scrap.

"Daddy, please come home," said Petra softly. "Mummy's waiting."

"I'll go home when I damn well like!" shouted Peter. "For God's sake, do we have to go through all this every Friday? I'm not some old wreck of a car, I don't need a breakdown service to get me home!"

"Daddy, Gundi isn't well..."

"She's got a bit of a cough, that's all."

"The doctor said it might turn to pneumonia."

Peter smiled the same unpleasant smile again. He bent down to the children, the alcohol on his breath wafting around them. "That's your mother, up to her tricks again!" he told them earnestly. "Trying to get me to come straight home! Put my paycheck down on the table and start budgeting. Oh dear, so Peter Kaul actually dared buy himself a drink with his hard-earned money! Oh, how can we ever forgive him? Lord have mercy on a miserable sinner! Hard at work for fifty-two hours this week, with overtime—surely the poor soul deserves a drop of schnapps! That's how your mother wants it, eh? It's a dog's life, I can tell you. You'll understand when you're grown up. Your Daddy's had a hard time... everyone out to kick him when he's down... even your Mummy..." There were tears in Kaul's eyes. He put his arms around his children, more for support than by way of an embrace. "It makes your poor Daddy cry... everyone's bad to your Daddy... come along, let's go home..."

They crossed the street to the bus stop.

"Drunken idiot!" said the factory guard, watching Peter Kaul and the children get into a Number 17 and ride away.

"He'll be okay again on Monday," said the porter, filling his pipe. "Don't ask me what makes him that way—but I reckon there's something behind it. He wasn't always like that, or so I've heard; he's only been drinking two years, but it's getting worse. You mark my words, there has to be some kind of reason!"

Peter and his children got home at seven. They had taken the bus to the railway station, where Peter went into the post office. "You wait outside," he told the children. "I'll be right back. What's this place, then?"

"The post office, Daddy," said Heinz.

"And you just remember that! They don't sell liquor in the post office, do they? Mummy's little spies have to remember everything, right?"

It was nearly ten minutes before Peter came out of the post office again. His face was pale, he stared at his children, and his hands were shaking as they hovered above the two young heads in the ghost of a caress.

"Poor kids," he said slowly. His tongue felt heavy and swollen. "You deserve a better father. Life's hell, that's what . . . sheer hell!"

They went the rest of the way home on foot: a mistake, and a dangerous one, as it turned out on the next corner, where there was a pub. Peter made straight for the brewery sign, tugging his children along by the hand. "You don't understand!" he growled, when Petra hung back and started crying. "Your Daddy *needs* a drink!"

"Mummy says . . ." Heinz was resisting, too. But Kaul could smell the beery aroma of the pub, he could already taste schnapps on his tongue, feel the mists that made everything so much easier to bear swirling through his brain. And then he would get that wonderful sense of release, he would be free, content, marvelously happy. He could dream then: childlike dreams of bliss—a little house in a meadow, silvery mountains in the sun, an eagle hovering overhead as he lay in the grass among the wild flowers, kissing a girl as young and pretty as Susanne had been thirteen years before. He would feel strong, full of energy! The world was beautiful, sunny, happy . . . until the mists came down again, veiling it all, taking everything away, and he would wake up and find himself back in his

rumpled bed, or on the old sofa in the kitchen. The place would smell of cabbage, not flowers, and instead of Susanne at twenty there would be a careworn woman of thirty-two standing by the stove, in clean overalls, her hair combed back, her make-up the best she could manage with her limited means; she tried so desperately not to appear embittered to him, the children, the neighbors and indeed to herself. But her skin was dull, and unhappiness had etched lines on her face. The soft, melting lips he had kissed in his dream would twist wryly and say, "Have you slept it off? Can we talk seriously? You know, you've drunk away twenty dollars—and that was just today!"

Then he would long for another drink, for the dream, for oblivion and freedom and love, sun and warmth. The schnapps could give him all that!

"You want your Daddy to cry again?" he asked the children. "Just one little glass! You can tell Mummy. You can tell her everything—little spies!"

It was a long, tiring way home. They had visited nine pubs before Petra and Heinz finally saw the housing complex ahead. Block after block of five-story buildings, all just the same, like a barracks, painted a dingy white. There were children playing on the pavements, and a group of five women gossiping outside the grocer's shop, four of them pregnant and one of those pregnant for the ninth time. There was nothing to be done about it: life had taken on an inevitable rhythm of work, meals, a bottle of beer or so, television, bed. A repetitive cycle, culminating for these women once a year in the labor ward, and then starting all over again.

The Kaul family lived in the third building of the fourth block, on the first floor. They had a three-room apartment: a bedroom for the parents, one for the children, and a living room which was also the kitchen. Susanne was in the kitchen waiting for her family to get home. Her youngest child, one-year-old Gundula, who had such a dreamy look in her eyes, and whose legs were so curiously limp, was already asleep in an old pram. Peter had drunk away the money for a new pram six months ago, on his way to buy it.

Susanne spent half her life erecting a façade in front of her misery. She made her own clothes, and the children's, she kept the apartment scrupulously clean, and when she went out she held her head high, like a happy woman with a good husband. She never spoke a word against Peter; she taught the children to say their Daddy was the best Daddy in the world. Keeping

up appearances like this was hard work. Everyone in the housing complex knew Peter, they could hear him singing or shouting every Friday when he was drunk. They were sorry for Susanne and sympathized with her, though they did not show it, knowing she would mind pity worse than anything.

Heinz came into the kitchen first; he wanted to show he was a man, he was brave, he could look after his sister. Peter was in the lavatory; Susanne could hear the splashing sound from the kitchen. A muscle twitched in her face. There were certain outward signs of the state of his intoxication. When he sang he was harmless, when he was silent she could at least talk to him, when he became lachrymose he had to go to bed, if he was raving and blustering Susanne knew she had to keep quiet herself until his own noise tired him out. The final stage was when he lost all his inhibitions and did not even bother to shut the lavatory door.

"I couldn't stop him, Mummy," Heinz explained. "We went to the post office first, and then . . . Mummy, what can we do about it?"

Susanne patted Heinz's cheek. Petra followed him into the kitchen, crying. She stood close to the wall.

"Sit down, children," Susanne said, huskily. "Petra, you get the fried potatoes out of the oven. I'll be back in a minute." She left the room, closing the door behind her. Heinz and Petra exchanged understanding glances.

"Do you think he'll start shouting again?" asked Petra in a low voice.

"No, he's too tired today."

"Want to bet?"

"Bet what?"

"Ten marbles."

"Okay." Heinz went to the kitchen door. "I bet he won't shout. He's going into the bedroom . . ."

Peter saw his wife standing in the narrow hall as he came out of the lavatory, doing up his trousers. He leered at Susanne and went past her into the bedroom, where he took off his jacket, throwing it on the bed.

"Paycheck's in there. It's all yours . . ."

"How much have you drunk this time?"

"Just enough to make me happy!" He sat on the edge of the bed, took off his shoes, flung them at the wardrobe door and bawled, "Hands, knees, and boompsa-daisy!"

In the kitchen, Heinz held out his hand to his sister. "Ten

marbles, please! He isn't shouting, he's singing."

"He's throwing his shoes about, though. Five marbles!"

"All right."

The children went back to the table. Petra took the pan of fried potatoes out of the oven, served herself and Heinz, and put it back again.

"Anything else?" asked Heinz.

"There's some beetroot."

"Good!"

They ate in silence, listening, and glancing at the door now and then. They could hear voices from the bedroom, but no quarreling. In fact Peter was lying on his bed wanting nothing but sleep and dreams. His brain was blessedly dulled by alcohol, his limbs felt almost weightless, he could hear Susanne's voice, but he hardly took in her words.

"I can't go on like this!" she was saying. "Peter, I just can't—I'm at the end of my tether! How can I keep up with the rent, and the installments on the television and the radio, the fridge and the washing machine? Every week, when they come for the money, I have to ask them to come back next Friday. Soon they'll be repossessing everything." She stopped, staring at her husband, who was lying on his back, eyes closed, mouth half open. "Are you even listening to me?" she cried.

Kaul gave a slight start. "Yes."

"Peter, I can't go on! One of these days I—I shall do myself in!"

He opened his eyes, his glassy alcoholic gaze searching for her.

"Better leave that to me, Susi," he said, his tongue heavy.

"Why do you do it, Peter?" She sat down beside him and suddenly burst into tears. He put out a hand and laid it on her thigh. "You're ruining all our lives! Even if you don't care about me anymore, think of the children!"

"The children!" His eyes flashed. "Spies! Their mother's little spies! How could you?"

"I—I thought if you saw the children you might leave the liquor alone."

"Thought! She thought! I drink when *I* want to!" Peter stretched. Peace, he thought. Where are you? Where are my dreams of flowery meadows, snow-covered mountains . . .

"Don't we mean anything to you anymore?" Susanne's voice was low and tearful. She leaned over the pale face, rather puffy at the moment, overcoming the nausea she felt at the

alcohol on his breath, and buried her face in his chest. "We used to be so happy, Peter . . . till two years ago . . . will it never get any better?"

"Quiet . . ." Kaul stretched comfortably, and a pleasant warmth ran through him. The sun's shining, he thought happily. Soon I'll feel the wind blowing through the grass and the flowers, I'll hear the cowbells . . . Susanne, you'll never understand how wonderful it is to be drunk, as gloriously drunk as I am!

Susanne rose from the bed. He was asleep, breathing noisily, his chest heaving up and down, but he was smiling. In repose his mouth was like a child's, like Petra's when she was asleep.

The children were still sitting at the kitchen table, drinking their milk. "Where are you going, Mummy?" they asked, when Susanne came into the room wearing her coat. "What's Daddy doing?"

"Daddy's gone to sleep." Susanne was breathing fast. "You get undressed and go to bed. I'm just going out for a little, I'll soon be back. Sleep well!"

She kissed Petra and Heinz and hurried out of the apartment.

It's our last hope, she thought. It's all I can think of.

She hurried through the streets in the quiet of the evening, until she saw the slender spire of St. Christopher's church ahead. She slowed down, but walked on, her steps firmer and more determined now. She stopped outside the rectory, turned up her coat collar as if it were raining, and rang the bell.

She had to ring three times before she heard footsteps approaching the door.

Father Hans Merckel, priest of St. Christopher's, was not too pleased when his housekeeper announced a visitor so late in the day. He was in the middle of composing his Sunday sermon, and it was an unwritten law that no one was to disturb his train of thought while he was busy with this task. He would shut himself up in his study to devote himself to the sermon, not emerging again for some time, and when he did come out he would seem strangely remote, as if quite absorbed in the text upon which he had been meditating.

This Friday evening, Father Merckel had chosen a particularly beautiful text: "Behold, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." It would make a good sermon, touching on many different aspects of life.

"Yes?" the priest called through the study door, when his housekeeper's knocking persisted. "What is it?"

She told him he had a visitor, a woman who would not go away, who was crying and saying there was a whole family's life at stake.

"One moment," said Father Merckel. He could be heard moving things around, clearing his throat, closing a door. Then he opened the door of his study and looked out into the hall.

The priest was an impressive, sturdy figure of a man, in his early sixties, with snow-white hair and a ruddy complexion; in conjunction with his deep voice, these gave him the air of a patriarch. Standing in his pulpit or at the altar, or carrying the sacraments through the streets in the procession on Corpus Christi Day, wearing his golden cope, he impressed everyone with his charismatic personality.

"Come in," said Father Merckel, standing aside to let Susanne into his study. The first thing she noticed was the familiar smell of alcohol in the room, slight but unmistakable. She turned to Father Merckel in surprise, and found herself looking into a pair of kindly, calm, bright old eyes.

"I'm sorry to visit you so late," she began, but Father Merckel shook his head, took her arm and guided her to an armchair.

"No time is too late for God," he said, "and I am God's servant."

Timidly, Susanne sat down and stole a glance around her. She saw walls of bookshelves, dark old furniture, a large, solid desk, a wooden crucifix on the wall behind it, an old statue of the Madonna and Child on a shelf in one corner, two tables, a worn but genuine Oriental rug, a carved oak prie-dieu of the kind that can still be found in old monasteries.

"It's about Peter—my husband, Father. Peter Kaul, he's an electrician at the Marsellus works here in Essen."

"I see." Father Merckel folded his hands. Has the husband died or had an accident, he wondered, and she's just heard the news? He waited to hear more.

"My husband is a drunk, Father," said Susanne quietly. Father Merckel unclasped his hands.

"What?"

"He drinks. Every Friday he drinks over half his pay, we're up to our ears in debt, the children have no proper clothes and we have to starve to pay the rent. Sometimes he raves, sometimes he's just like a child, he'll be throwing the furniture

about one minute, and the next he's whimpering like a puppy. He . . . he's not in his right mind, Father! The liquor has driven him crazy!" She raised both hands as if in prayer. "Help me, Father, please help me! You're our priest—he *must* listen to a priest! You're my last hope—please help me!"

She was crying again, her hands in front of her face. Father Merckel, who had been pacing up and down, stopped in front of her, took her hands and gently lowered them.

"Tell me the whole story," he said, in his deep and kindly voice. "If I can do anything to help, I certainly will."

Susanne stared at him, her mouth distorted as if in a silent scream. He smells of liquor, she thought, an icy shudder running through her. Wine: I can tell the difference between the smell of wine and spirits. Wine is more acid.

"Y . . . yes, Father," she stammered. "I'll tell you all about it—but can you help him?"

"God can help everyone." Father Merckel let go of Susanne's hands and sat down opposite her. "Now, get it all off your chest, Mrs. Kaul. That's what you need to do most at the moment."

On Saturday morning Peter lay in bed, his throat dry and burning, suffering from unbearable nausea and trying to vomit every ten minutes or so, though he could only manage a painful retching, bringing up a mere trickle of bile and gastric acid.

Susanne was sitting in the kitchen, trying to budget with what was left of the pay. The two older children were at school, little Gundula was lying in her pram playing with her brightly colored blocks of wood. Peter dragged himself out of bed to get a glass of water. "The hell with your stupid sums!" he told Susanne, hitching his pajama trousers up around his waist. "They won't make it any better! Right, so we're twenty-five dollars short again . . . look, I'll make it up next week. I'll do two night shifts—how about that, Susi?"

"The man will be coming for the installment on the washing machine any moment now. We're already two weeks behind, and if I don't pay this time they'll take it away. But if I *do* pay we can't have meat at all this week, only potatoes and vegetables." Susanne put her pencil down on the money. "Peter, I have to get the money you drank somehow!"

Peter did not reply. She's right, he thought, getting back into bed. Yes, she's right! I'll look for work moonlighting. There's the rest of today, and Sunday; I know there's work for

an electrician on the new building site. I could go there every Saturday and Sunday. I'll show them all I can look after my family! Hell . . . Susanne's right!

But they don't know why I drink, he thought, misery sweeping over him again. And I can't tell them . . . all I can do is drink when I think of it! I want to forget. Peace, that's what I want, peace! And Susanne mustn't know either. She does love me, in spite of everything; if she knew it would kill her love!

He was crying now, twisting the bedspread in his hands and sobbing quietly. The doorbell rang. Eleven o'clock. The man for the installment on the washing machine. Peter pulled the quilt over his head, escaping from reality.

At about the same time Father Merckel was facing Dr. Konrad Lingen, the well-known psychiatrist and brain surgeon, in the latter's consulting rooms.

In choosing to consult Dr. Lingen, the priest had picked a leading authority. Lingen had his own clinic outside Essen, in the lightly wooded countryside of the Ruhr valley, where he performed operations which made international headlines. His particular field was complicated brain tumors, but neuroraphies and risky operations such as leucotomies and frontal lobotomies were also carried out at his clinic, and Dr. Lingen had a high reputation in professional circles. The Ruhr district courts frequently called on him for an expert opinion, and his evidence was always relevant, confident and correct. At the age of forty-six, Konrad Lingen was at the height of his career; all he was waiting for now was the chair of psychiatric medicine at the planned new University of the Ruhr.

"Yes, Father; it's not an uncommon story, you know," Dr. Lingen said, a touch of impatience in his tone. He had been listening to the story of the Kaul family for over an hour, and was asking himself where it was leading.

Father Merckel looked at Lingen: tall, lean, elegant, a man whose greatest asset was the sensitivity of his fingertips. During operations he seemed to have a receiver in them, registering the finest of reactions and automatically working to counter them.

"I'd like to help this family, doctor," said Father Merckel. "I intend to have a word with Kaul myself, but I want you to help the wife . . . and that child, little Gundula. I'm afraid there may be something badly wrong there."

Dr. Lingen glanced at the notes he had been making.

"You say the child was conceived when Kaul was completely drunk?"

"Yes. He literally raped his wife. She didn't want it, but he was so drunk he acted like an animal." Father Merckel passed a hand over his silvery hair. "So the child came along. She's a year old now, can't sit up yet, let alone walk, and all she does is babble and play with her blocks. She hardly reacts at all to external stimuli, except to crow when she smells food coming. I should like you to examine the child, doctor. I'll pay."

"My dear Merckel, I ought to take that last remark as an insult! I imagine that a priest has a good reason for what he asks! Can the child come out to the clinic?"

"Yes, I'll bring her myself." Merckel rose. "I hardly know how to thank you."

"Then don't!" Lingen waved aside the priest's protest. "Let me be selfish enough to think that *I* may need to call on *you* for help some day. We can settle up then!"

"Well, such things can happen—and sooner than one expects!"

"Let's not tempt Providence!" Dr. Lingen laughed, and closed his appointment book. "Shall we say Monday, at ten? I see I have to operate on a tumor at eleven, which will take some four hours, and I can't manage an earlier day because I have to give medical evidence in court. Monday at ten, then?"

"Excellent. And . . . and if my suspicions are correct?"

Dr. Lingen shrugged his shoulders. "As I told you, this kind of thing is quite common. I could show you any number of other such cases."

Father Merckel left Lingen's consulting rooms with mixed feelings. I may have made matters worse for the poor woman, he thought. But how can we help without knowing the truth?

Peter worked on the new building site that Sunday, earning fifteen dollars. The site foreman begged him to come for an hour or so every day, after work, offering more than Kaul would actually have asked; he agreed, collected his fifteen dollars, and resisted the temptation to have a few drinks on the way home. I'd have earned them, too, he thought. A couple of hours a day, after work . . . Susanne couldn't really begrudge me a drink!

Monday came, and the week pursued its usual course. Kaul

went into Essen at six fifteen in the morning, and got home at seven, tired, hungry and thirsty. He had a beer, Susanne cooked supper, they talked, they watched television—and they waited for Friday, the day that wound up the week's work and opened the gates of hell.

Susanne had not told Peter about her visit to the clinic yet. Dr. Lingen and the priest had advised her not to, for the time being. Gundula had been given a very thorough examination. Dr. Lingen and one of his senior consultants wheeled her away down a long corridor in her scuffed old pram, and a door closed silently behind them. Susanne clutched the arms of her chair.

"What will they do to her?" she asked Father Merckel, in a low voice. "Why can't I stay with her? They're not going to hurt her, are they?"

"Don't worry." Merckel patted her trembling hand. "Dr. Lingen has an international reputation—Gundula couldn't be in better hands. You and I can wait here."

They were sitting in an area off the main corridor, facing a large window with a view down to the river Ruhr. There were wicker chairs and small tables, and flowers on the window sill. A pleasant place to wait.

In the examination room, the two doctors placed Gundula on a leather couch with a rubber sheet under her. Lingen looked at her, noting her reactions to her new and unfamiliar surroundings. She showed no fear or alarm, just played with a handkerchief the consultant had put into her little hands, and when they tried to stand her on her bandy legs, which kept crumpling under her, she uttered no sound. Her big blue eyes looked around her, placidly but without expression, her little mouth smiled for no apparent reason when they sat her up and she merely fell backwards like a doll.

"We hardly need to go any further," said Dr. Lingen, "but we'll take her through the whole range of tests, to satisfy Father Merckel."

Barely an hour later, a nurse pushed the pram back along the corridor to the waiting area. Susanne jumped up and ran to meet it. "Gundi!" she cried. "Oh, did it hurt, darling?" She bent over the child. Gundula was playing with her colored blocks again; she seemed perfectly happy. "What did the doctor say?" asked Susanne, clutching the plastic-covered handle of the pram.

"I don't know." The nurse smiled. "I was only told to bring her back to you."

"Thank you, nurse!" said Susanne happily.

My baby's laughing, she thought, they haven't hurt her! Gundi is such a happy, contented little thing, I don't suppose she cried at all.

All Lingen told Susanne that day was that she should not mention the examination at home for the time being. He was more forthcoming to Father Merckel. As usual, his diagnosis was brief and to the point.

"Not unusual in an alcoholic's child," he said. "Brain damage and physical handicaps: the result of hormonal imbalance. She will never be an adult, her mental age will always remain that of an infant."

"You mean she's an idiot?" said Father Merckel, quietly.

"If you want to put it so bluntly, yes. She'll learn to walk eventually, she'll acquire a limited knowledge of her surroundings, but she'll never be educable." Lingen shrugged his shoulders. "As I said, not a unique case, Father."

Father Merckel nodded. "Thank you, doctor," he said with difficulty. "Well, now we know . . . but how am I to tell the poor mother?"

"I shouldn't tell her yet." Dr. Lingen glanced at his watch. He was late for his tumor operation. "Stick to your original plan: talk to the father first, and don't spare his feelings! Make sure he understands the situation. I wish you the best of luck."

Father Merckel had chosen Friday evening for his interview with Peter on purpose: that was the day his personality problem showed itself with the regularity of clockwork.

Peter had been reluctant to go when he first received the invitation. "What's all this about?" he had shouted. "What do I want with a priest? Yes, that's right—go setting people against me behind my back! What sort of a wife do you think you are? Everyone's against me!"

But at the end of his shift on Friday Petra and Heinz were not standing at the porter's lodge, waiting for their father and his paycheck. It was the first time in weeks, and Kaul could not make it out. Susanne wouldn't have done anything silly, he thought, would she? She wouldn't have taken the children and . . . ?

He threw away the cigarette he was smoking. He wanted to shout: I haven't had a drop! Look, for the first time in two years I haven't touched a drop this Friday! Well—two beers and couple of nips, not enough to count! I'm sober, perfectly

sober, even though my throat's crying out for a drink and my mind for peace and oblivion! And today, of all days, they haven't come! I'd have bought them sweets, ice cream, chocolate—I'd have shown them my full paycheck and told them: look, it's all there! All the money, you tell Mummy that!

He took his usual Friday route home, taking the bus to the station, going into the post office, walking the rest of the way. But this time he went past the pubs, forcing himself to look away. He walked three times around the rectory of St. Christopher's, then circled the church itself, giving himself advice. Just go in, tell the priest there's no point discussing it, he'd never understand, be polite and keep your temper, then go home and put that paycheck on the table in front of Susanne, breathe right in her face and smile, and say, "Smell that? I haven't had a drop!" And wait for her praise and approval!

Father Merckel was expecting Peter. His housekeeper let Kaul in; she was wearing her hat and coat, since the priest had told her to take the evening off and go to the cinema.

"Evening, Father," said Peter, standing at the study door. His nostrils suddenly flared, his upper lip twitched. The room smelled of alcohol. Of whiskey. Kaul did not like whiskey, he preferred schnapps and vodka, those clear spirits which looked like water and had such a magical effect.

"Come in, Mr. Kaul," said Father Merckel. "Close the door, will you?"

"Father, I only came to say . . ."

"Yes, I know." The priest overbore his protest. Kaul came in, and saw a table with armchairs grouped around it. It held glasses, and three bottles. Whiskey, vodka, gin. His mouth seemed to burn, his stomach cramped convulsively, the longing for liquor dried his mouth. He swallowed, and sat down, his knees trembling.

They stared at each other like two boxers in the ring, measuring one another up, the imposing figure of the pastor standing there like Moses on Mount Sinai, Kaul in his chair with his hands between his knees, inwardly trembling, but ready to spring like a beast of prey.

He's not a priest, thought Peter, he's a devil! He knows I drink, and he puts liquor and glasses right here on the table in front of me. On a Friday too!

"Well, so here we are, my dear Kaul," said Father Merckel. "It's quite a rare occurrence. I don't often see you in church, do I?"

"You never see me in church!" Peter grunted, turning his head away. The bottle of vodka shone, the gin beside it seemed to be singing to him. He knew that was an hallucination, but it felt real enough.

"No, I don't." Father Merckel smiled broadly. "We might as well be honest! And why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why don't you ever come to church?"

"Because I work myself to the bone Monday to Friday, Father, I go moonlighting too—all to keep up with the standard of living in this wonderful society of the economic miracle—and I like to sleep on Sunday! I've a right to that, haven't I? So far as I remember, God said something like: on the Sabbath shalt thou cease from labor. . ."

"That's roughly it. Is it a long time since you last read the Bible?"

"Yes."

"Full of fine things, the Bible. Live according to its precepts, my dear fellow, and life on earth becomes Paradise. Unfortunately, it also becomes boring."

Peter stared at the priest, thinking; is that any way for a man of God to talk? He took a deep breath and tried to rise, but the priest's hand pressed him back into the chair. He had a strong grip. Kaul looked at the singing bottle of gin. Hell, he thought, I ought to pick that up and take a drink, then I'd be strong tōo!

Merckel seemed to have read his visitor's mind. He walked around the table again once or twice, lost in thought, then stopped and coughed. His own throat was dry, no denying it. And if he weakened now, God Himself must realize it was only a sacrifice, a means of laying bare his guest's troubled spirit. An unbeliever had said the end justifies the means, but there was some point in it. A fallible human being must be approached by means of fallible humanity.

Having reached this point in his internal debate, Father Merckel sighed softly, asked God's forgiveness again, told himself sternly he was only making excuses for his backsliding, and leaned down to Kaul.

"A drink, my dear fellow?" he asked, picking up the bottle of vodka.

"No, thanks. I don't drink." Kaul's voice was hoarse.

"You're lying, Peter." Father Merckel filled a slender glass to the brim, and poured another for himself. "Good health!"

Peter took the glass, his hands shaking so much that the spirit slopped over. He tossed the drink straight back, and then licked the spilled liquor off the backs of his hands.

"Better now, eh?" Father Merckel sat down opposite Kaul. "Would you like another?"

"No, thank you, Father."

"That's a lie too. I can see your Adam's apple twitching. My dear man, I recognize the symptoms. Come on—after all, it's Friday!"

Kaul's jaw dropped. His face went so pale it was almost translucent. He took the glass Father Merckel was offering him and drank the contents.

"What . . . what do you want, Father?" he said hoarsely.

"I want to hear your confession, Peter. We're quite alone here, except for God—and God keeps secrets."

"I don't have any confession to make to you."

"What is it that is so wrong about Fridays?"

Peter stared at the priest, and reached for the bottle. Without asking permission, he poured himself another glass and greedily drank it down. As Father Merckel sat watching, he repeated the process three times.

"There's nothing wrong with Fridays!" said Kaul, too loudly. The mists were already swirling in his brain. "I get paid, that's all."

"Why do you drink?"

"I like the taste."

Merckel refilled both their glasses. Peter sat staring as the truth sank in. *He* drinks too, he thought in astonishment. For God's sake, he's another one! The priest drinks!

They stopped talking; they drank. Soon the bottle of vodka was empty, and they went on to the gin. By the time that bottle, too, was half empty, they were clinking glasses and laughing uproariously at one another's inane remarks. As the level sank in the gin bottle, Merckel put a record on his stereo system. "A polka!" he cried. "Ah, those were the days, when we used to dance the polka!" And he danced, hopping and stamping like a clumsy bear, while Peter, bawling the tune, beat time on the table top. What a wonderful day, thought Kaul. I'm so happy, so lighthearted!

Suddenly, as if felled by an ax, he collapsed forward, his brow hitting the table top. He was whimpering and clutching the table leg. "The swine!" he muttered. "The filthy swine! He's taken everything away from me . . ."

Merckel immediately switched off the stereo, and went unsteadily over to Kaul. He fell into his chair, stroked back his wild silver hair and dabbed his red, sweating face. Kaul raised his head and looked at the priest, his eyes empty.

"It's been the same every week these last two years—I have to hand over twenty percent of my pay, every Friday. Twenty percent! If I don't he'll go and tell the management . . . and that'll be the end of me! You see, I've always kept it quiet . . . nobody knows. Except him . . . him . . ."

Merckel nodded. "Sounds like a charming fellow!" He pressed Kaul back into his chair again. "Why didn't you ever tell anyone?" he asked.

Kaul swallowed. His red-rimmed, watery eyes showed fear and terror as he looked at the priest. "I . . . I killed a man," he said quietly.

Father Merckel had been ready for almost anything, but not this. "You did what?" he said. "Killed a man? It doesn't sound likely!"

Peter shook his head frantically. "I never meant to! I was careless, that's all!" He mopped his eyes as the scene came billowing up out of the alcoholic mists in his mind.

The Amalia mine, three years ago. They had opened up a new gallery, and Kaul was wiring it. He had spent ten days underground, laying cables, fitting distribution boxes, making a good job of the wiring. Then he connected the installation to the mains, the power was coming through, and he realized it was twelve o'clock. He went off to lunch, leaving the ends of two cables still uninsulated. He was only taking half an hour for lunch, and then he'd finish the job. He hung a notice on the fuse box saying: Caution—Live.

The short circuit came ten minutes later. The fuses blew, and there lay Johann Milbach, miner, beside the fuse box and the two live wires. He had died instantly. No one would ever know why he had touched the wires, whether it was pure accident or not. Someone said the notice had fallen off and Milbach was putting it back. In any event, he was dead. He had had five children. Initially Peter was accused of negligence, but that was soon dropped. He had hung up a warning notice, and could not have been expected to do more.

But so far as Kaul himself was concerned, the case of Johann Milbach was far from closed. He went to the funeral, keeping apart from the other mourners, in mental agony as he saw Frida Milbach, Johann's widow, standing by the graveside with her

five children—a family that he had torn apart! Everyone said he was not to blame, but he developed a strong guilt complex. He kept reproaching himself: you're a murderer, you killed Milbach, you left those wires live, you killed a man who had five children, you're a murderer!

Peter really began drinking hard on the day of Johann Milbach's funeral. Afterward he told himself it wasn't really his fault—why had Milbach touched the wires? It went on like this for a year. When his conscience told him he was a murderer he drank, and sometimes he sent money, anonymously, to Frida Milbach. And then Hubert Bollanz came on the scene.

Bollanz had been working on the same level of the mine at the time. He had seen Milbach die, he had noticed the uninsulated cable ends. And he found out where Kaul went to work after leaving the Amalia mine.

The first letter was quite short. It ran: "Dear Peter, suppose a bloke's killed someone and no one knows, his wife and kids and his new boss don't know, that must be worth something, I guess. Milbach would be alive now and his kids would still have their Dad if you'd bothered to insulate those wires. Suppose the Marsellus personnel manager got to hear of it? No harm meant, Peter, but everything's got its price, and you won't want any trouble . . ." And so on.

Peter was unable to work for two days after this letter came. He spent those two days drinking, shattered to get confirmation of his own secret conviction that he was a murderer.

And he paid up. After hard bargaining, he paid Bollanz twenty percent of his week's wages, and Bollanz held his tongue. But it did not stop at that twenty percent. He drank away another thirty percent every Friday, because Fridays automatically reminded him he had a man's life on his conscience, he had made five children fatherless.

He poured out the whole story to the priest. "I go to the post office every Friday, to pay the money into Hubert's account. Twenty percent. I've paid for the last two years. And that's how the liquor really got hold of me—can you understand?—I *have* to drink, I can't help it . . . I'm afraid it might all come out, and then there's my wife and children, and all the time payment installments to pay off, and our debts, I work and work and I just can't seem to get on top of it. It gets worse and worse. I *have* to drink, don't I?"

"Go to the police," said Merckel firmly. "Tell them Bollanz is blackmailing you."

"*He* wouldn't like that—but I'd lose my job! Everyone would know, even Susanne . . . they mustn't know, I've always kept it quiet . . ."

He collapsed again, head on the table, weeping out loud.

Father Merckel cleared the bottles and glasses away. He was wondering: how can I help him? Get rid of all his other problems—his lies and fears and anxieties, this man Bollanz blackmailing him—and he'll still be left with the drinking. His body is too severely poisoned to rid itself of the craving. He'll always drink, he can't help it now . . . any more than I can. God forgive me, any more than I can! You know me, Lord, you know I sin in secret, though I am your faithful servant . . .

Unsteadily, Father Merckel crossed the room, opened the window to let in the cool night air, stretched, and felt his head clearing. Grasping Peter under the arms, he dragged him over to the window and shook him.

"Home!" stammered Kaul. "I want to go home."

Merciful darkness concealed the two swaying figures as Father Merckel helped Peter to the door of his apartment, rang the bell for him, and then pushed him into the hall, past the horrified and then stony Susanne.

"We'll discuss it tomorrow," he said. "Get him to bed—he needs sympathy, poor man."

Susanne closed the door. Hatred and disgust rose in her as she looked at her husband. She opened the bedroom door and pushed Peter into the room. With a grunt, he swayed toward the bed and fell face down on the pillows. "Susi . . ." he cried.

Susanne felt icy cold. She had no tears left, no reproaches, no words at all, only a sense of chilly determination.

"I'm leaving," she told the figure huddled on the bed. "I'm leaving tonight, with the children. It's none of your business where I go. I can work, I can look after myself, I don't want to sink into the mire with you! You hear me? I'm leaving for good! Even if I could forget everything else, I'll always have something to remind me what a fiend you are: Gundi! I know what's wrong with her now. They don't want to tell me, but I've been watching her today. She's half-witted! My sweet little Gundi is an idiot! Because you wanted it when you were drunk—you raped me, you bastard! And now Gundi—it's the last straw!"

She left the bedroom and went next door to wake the children.

Peter hauled himself up, clinging to the headboard of the

bed, and stumbled into the kitchen. The cold night air had cleared his head, though his limbs were still leaden with alcohol. This time he had taken in what Susanne was saying. Something seemed to have snapped inside him. I must end it, he thought. Put an end to it all, and then we'll all be at peace.

He dragged himself over to the shabby old pram, leaned over Gundi, staring at her sleeping face. Her hands were clenched into fists, her mouth was open.

An idiot, he thought. She's an idiot! And it's all my fault. No one can take that guilt away from me—no priest, no court of law, not even God. I've cheated a living soul out of its life.

He looked at Gundi again, helplessly patting the quilt over her, and then stumbled out of the kitchen. Susanne glanced out of the children's room, where he could hear Petra and Heinz crying quietly.

"Go and lie down," she told him. "Sleep it off."

"No!" He stared at Susanne. "No! Things will be different now—everything will be different." Suddenly he lunged forward, so fast and so suddenly that Susanne could not avoid him. Using both hands, he pushed her inside the children's room, slammed the door and locked it from the outside.

"I'm the one who's leaving!" he shouted. "Don't look for me. I'm going to end it all . . . set you free . . . free . . ."

"Peter!" shrieked Susanne, rattling the door handle. "Peter, unlock this door!"

But Peter did not hear. He was outside on the stairs already, stumbling headlong down them. Out in the street he looked back, once, at the grayish building and the windows of his apartment. The window of the children's room was wide open. Susanne's head appeared, with Heinz and Petra beside her.

"Daddy!" they screamed.

Then he was running, running like a hunted animal. I'll go down to the river, he thought. Somewhere among the bushes by the Ruhr I'll find peace. I don't deserve to live any longer . . .

2

He did not know how long he ran, or where he was going as he chased aimlessly down streets, across fields, past a football stadium, through bushes and tall, wet grass. He tore open the front of his shirt as he ran, took off his jacket and threw it away. He was howling like a beaten dog.

Suddenly he found himself standing in long grass, surrounded by willows and hawthorn bushes, by the river Ruhr. Its muddy waters gurgled by, a little whirlpool eddied among some rocks, and a dead fish floated in the shallows, its gleaming silver belly upward, rocking among the water weeds.

Peter stared into the water. Well, he thought, so this is where the world ends for Peter Kaul, aged thirty-five, husband of Susanne, father of Petra, Heinz—and pretty little Gundi, an idiot, a halfwit, because he had forced Susanne to conceive when he was drunk!

He sat down on the grassy bank, took off his shoes and socks, put the shoes neatly side by side, took off his trousers and folded them along the creases, laid them beside the shoes, took off his underpants and pulled his undershirt and shirt over his head in a single movement. In these last moments of his life he felt a crazy compulsion to be neat and correct. I was born naked, he thought, and I'll die naked.

Then he heard voices, somewhere quite close. They're looking for me, thought Peter, clenching his fists. Susanne has called the police! Sirens, the fire brigade, ambulances! For God's sake, a man can't even be left to die in peace! What could be better proof of the cruelty of life?

Kaul took his first step into the river. He did not even notice how cold the water was, he was looking at the gleaming silvery

body of the dead fish. A pretty thing, he thought, even in decay. I shan't look nearly so pleasant. I've heard a drowned corpse is a nasty sight, it swells up like a yeast dumpling and goes soggy and slippery, and it stinks. But I shan't be here to see or smell it. We'll be at peace, silvery fish, you and me. That's good, little fish, that's wonderful.

Suddenly a sense of despair swept over him and he burst into tears, up to his knees in the cold water, looking across the eddying river to the bushes on the opposite bank, the fields of potatoes and cabbage and rye on the gentle slope beyond, then a wood, and above it all the sky, quite light because there was a full moon shining.

Full moon. Peter swallowed. He raised his head to sniff the night air, thinking in amazement that even the wind smelled of liquor, though in fact it was only the alcohol on his own breath. One more drink, he thought. Bloody hell, I should have had one more drink before I died!

Now they had found his discarded jacket on the bank. A dog barked briefly and then growled. It would be a police dog on a long leather leash.

"Kaul!" three voices shouted. "Peter Kaul! Don't be a fool, man! Come here! We'll get you anyway!"

Peter ducked. How he hated the peremptory tones of German officialdom! We'll get you anyway! They might have been saying: We'll have your head! Or: We'll tear you limb from limb!

Why did you do it, Susanne? he wondered mournfully. Why call the police, why not let me die? You should be glad, you should put on your best clothes and celebrate! But no—you set the dogs on me!

God, how I hate them all, every one of them!

In the moonlight, he waded out into the middle of the river.

"Stop," someone shouted on the bank. "Stay where you are, Kaul!"

He heard splashing behind him, a loud panting noise, the crunch of boots on wet gravel. But he plunged on, mouth open, eyes turned up to the moon . . . the water was up to his hips now, up to his waist, his chest, his throat . . . then someone hit him on the head and dragged him back.

"Damn you!" he yelled, hitting out wildly. "Let me go, you fucking bastards . . ."

The two policemen had no difficulty in overpowering the struggling, naked man. They got him into the shallows; he was still thrashing about, so they punched him on the chin, and he collapsed. Another policeman, up on the bank, wrapped him in a blanket, and he was carried to a waiting ambulance.

"It's the nut house for him!" said one of the drenched policemen, shaking himself. "Bastards like that should be left to drown themselves! What are the odds I've caught another cold?"

Peter was slow to come around; it was as if his brain was glad of a respite. He was still unconscious when they took him out of the ambulance at the state mental hospital. The young doctor on night duty examined him.

"Suicide attempt?" said the doctor, briskly. "And an alcoholic . . . that'll be Wing 3, Ward 70. Take him up."

And so Peter arrived in Ward 70, its beds already holding eleven other alcoholics: hollow men, eaten away by their addiction, their delirious minds blunted or brutish. The doors of hell had shut behind him.

But he did not know that yet. He lay on his bed naked, only a gray-brown hospital blanket over him to give some sort of warmth, and slipped from unconsciousness into a deep sleep.

Two of his new companions sat up in bed and stared at the new arrival.

"See that?" asked one, with a shrill, bleating laugh. "You reckon he's been flashing it at little girls in the park?"

His neighbor, a man from Berlin, licked his lips. "Wouldn't mind getting my own hands on it," he murmured.

"Oh, fuck off!"

The other man grunted, and lay down again. "We had this club in Berlin, see? You could be in it if you took your trousers down and . . ."

"Shut your trap and go to sleep!"

Susanne was standing in the reception area of the hospital, crying. The young doctor was impatient and rather brusque. "Come back tomorrow," he told her. "He's asleep now, he's quite safe! What exactly do you want?"

"I . . . I want to take him home. That's where he belongs!"

"My dear Mrs. Kaul, he belongs here! The police brought him in, and he stays here pending an official decision. He did make a suicide attempt, you know!"

Susanne swayed, leaning against the whitewashed wall for

support. Pending an official decision, she thought. Suicide attempt . . . dear God, he's Peter, he's my husband, why should he be here in a mental hospital? He was desperate, that's all . . . he isn't mad!

"Visiting hours are three to five tomorrow, if the patient's state of health permits," said the doctor. "Good night." And he walked away. Susanne was left alone in the brightly lit reception area, wiping away her tears.

Oh, she thought, I should never have said it! I could have waited to tell him about Gundi. But I felt desperate, just then I hated him, I wanted to hit him where it would hurt most—and now he's here, somewhere in this huge building, in a room with barred windows and no door handle. Forgive me, Peter! But you'll be back home tomorrow, with Petra and Heinz and Gundi and me, and we'll sit down together and talk it all over, find some way to improve things. Because we do love each other, we really do!

It was wishful thinking, but the illusion was strong enough to take Susanne home and let her sleep in relative peace.

The hospital day began at six thirty. A male nurse came into the ward, shouting, "Get up!" and giving thermometers to those who were not likely to throw them about, or swallow the mercury and give themselves a mild case of poisoning.

Peter, abruptly woken, swung his legs out of bed and looked around, puzzled. He saw eleven pathetic figures, three of them standing by their beds urinating into chamber pots, he saw a man in white overalls leaving the ward and heard the same yell of "Get up!" from the ward next door. Only then did he realize he was naked. He snatched up the blanket and wrapped it around himself. There was a crackle of laughter from the next bed.

"We've all got one too, mate! Hey, not by any chance a girl, are you?"

Peter got up, wrapped in the blanket, and made his way barefoot to the door and out into the corridor, where he ran into the male nurse coming out of the next ward. The nurse was a tall, powerful man with a craggy pugilist's chin, deep-set eyes and bushy brows.

"Can I ask a question?" Kaul began, politely, clutching the blanket around him. The linoleum on the floor was freezing cold.

"Shut up and get back in there!" shouted the nurse.

"Where am I?" Kaul insisted.

"The Ritz, of course!"

"Listen . . . there must be some mistake!"

The nurse looked Kaul up and down. Oh yes, he thought, the new arrival. Brought in by the police last night. They'd sent a report up to the wards: attempted suicide, alcoholic. Running about stark naked! Charming!

"Look, sweetie!" The man grabbed Peter's blanket in both hands. "I'm in charge here! My name's Fritz—Judo Fritz, they call me. I'll tell you something: you talk too much or you get fresh with me, and you're in dead trouble!"

"But it *must* be a mistake!" Kaul's heart was thumping wildly. "Yesterday—"

"Yesterday you were playing at mermaids, mate. In your birthday suit. They reckon that's a bit kinky, so you've landed up here!"

"I wanted to kill myself!" shouted Peter.

Judo Fritz nodded wisely. "You better thank the good Lord you're here, then. You'll soon learn to enjoy life! What's your name?"

"Peter Kaul."

"Okay, Peter—chin up! You come with me, I'll get you something to wear. Can't have you running around naked, can we? There's nurses to think about, not to mention a whole bunch of fairies!"

Peter did not reply. It will all be cleared up soon, he thought. A doctor will examine me, and Susanne will get me out. Maybe the priest will help. It *has* to be a mistake.

He was issued hospital clothing: a gray vest, a darned pair of underpants, a pair of blue striped pajamas with the monogram of the State Mental Hospital on its breast pocket.

"That's the way!" said Judo Fritz, when Kaul had reluctantly put the things on. "Now, you just tell kind Uncle Fritz why you went in the water!"

"I want to see a doctor."

"You will, son, you will. The professor's on his way—he just can't wait!" Judo Fritz took hold of the top button of Kaul's pajamas. "Now you listen to me, mate. I'm the big shot around here! The professor sees the likes of you once a week, the senior consultant twice a week, the houseman sees you for a minute once a day, but *I'm* around the whole time. So it doesn't

pay to cross me, see?"

"Listen, I'm not ill!" stammered Kaul. And suddenly he realized exactly where he was. The full horror of it dawned upon him. He remembered newspaper reports: Sane Man Spends Ten Years in Mental Hospital. Man Buried Alive. The Snakepit . . . "Please get in touch with my wife! Susanne Kaul, in Essen . . ."

"Your wife knows all about it."

It was an appalling blow. "She . . . she knows I'm here?" Kaul couldn't believe it. Susanne would never let a thing like this happen!

"'Course she does."

"But why? Why am I here?" Kaul cried.

Judo Fritz looked at him critically, then raised his large hand, which was the size of a plate, and laid it on Kaul's head. It felt as if his head were being pressed right down into his shoulders. "You keep quiet, my little skinned rabbit!" The male nurse grinned broadly. "Just keep quiet and behave yourself!"

While the eleven dipsomaniacs in Ward 70 ate their breakfast, farting and belching without inhibition, Peter sat by the window, looking through the bars at a well-tended garden. He could not eat. The bread and jam stuck to his gums, the coffee was like pig swill. He gave his share to his two neighbors, who fell on it ravenously.

Judo Fritz came for him at eleven. "You—you're to see the professor! Big shot, aren't you? What was your name again?"

"Peter Kaul." Kaul's heart was beating wildly once more. It would all be cleared up now, he thought. He'd protest, demand a lawyer. And Susanne! And Father Merckel! Wanting to kill yourself didn't mean you were crazy, did it? What could be more natural than getting rid of something you don't want anymore?

The youthful ambition of Professor Brosius, a member of an old East Prussian family, had been to become an officer in the Uhlans. But somehow it had not worked out. For one thing, as a young man he had not had good health, for another, his name lacked the aristocratic prefix "von". Finding he could not be a cavalry officer, he became a doctor and psychiatrist instead, and in later life had the satisfaction of treating several aristocratic Uhlan officers whose names did begin with "von", usually suffering from psychiatric disorders resulting from ne-

glected gonorrhea. But he still retained something of the manner of a Prussian army officer. "A mental hospital is like a barracks," Professor Brosius would sometimes say. "It's our business to train people to conform."

In medical circles, Professor Brosius was considered an expert on the drying out of alcoholics and the treatment of delirium tremens. He enjoyed a drink himself, firmly maintaining that alcohol taken in moderation was medicinal. In private life he was a fond husband, a stern but kind father, and an alarming father-in-law; his daughters' husbands, one a gynecologist and the other an architect, still were in awe of him after ten years of marriage.

Professor Brosius took two indigestion tablets for his heartburn (the result of an evening spent drinking champagne with a wealthy manufacturer whose son was here in the hospital, in a private room), and had Peter shown in. Remembering what Father Merckel had just told him, he looked at the new patient with interest. It was because of Merckel that he was seeing Kaul himself; with so many patients coming and going, Brosius could not see them all, and he concentrated on the hard cases, those who would be show patients, enhancing his reputation.

"Please sit down, Mr. Kaul."

Kaul sat down. He thought, much cheered: he said Mr. Kaul! He had been alarmed at the prospect of meeting a professor, but he felt reassured. Hands tightly jammed between his knees, he looked hopefully at Brosius.

Professor Brosius studied Kaul through his highly polished glasses. Leptosomatic, he thought, mentally chalking up his observations. Lacks confidence, inhibited, introverted. Even the way he holds his hands is characteristic.

"Now, we must have a talk, Mr. Kaul," Brosius began. "First, however, is there anything you want?"

"Yes. I want to get out of here, Professor."

Brosius nodded. "And so you shall, Mr. Kaul."

"Thank you!" said Kaul, relieved.

"That's all right—now, what really happened yesterday?"

"Yesterday . . . well, I felt I couldn't take it anymore, Professor."

"Suddenly—just like that?"

"Yes." Peter stared at the floor. How had it been, in fact? There was Susanne looking at me as if it meant goodbye, saying she was leaving, she'd never come back, and how Gundi

was an idiot, would always be an idiot. "I—I wanted to rid the world of myself, Professor."

"Do you feel yourself so important?"

Kaul hesitated. He wondered: am I important? I never thought of it like that. I may be important to Susanne, I'm her husband, and to the children, I'm their father, but am I important to anyone else? Would it have made any difference if I'd drowned? Would the creditors have stayed away out of sympathy for Susanne? Not likely—they'd just have repossessed everything!

"Oh, my God, Professor—it's so appalling!" Peter's voice was trembling. Professor Brosius made a note on a pad in front of him. *Inclined to tearful outbursts,* he wrote.

"What is so appalling, Mr. Kaul?"

"Life."

"In your opinion."

"Life's appalling anyway."

"Why do you drink?"

"First it was because I was desperate, then I was afraid, now I have to drink. The liquor makes me feel so good. I can look at the ceiling and feel I'm in a meadow, and my hard bed is a soft wave carrying me away; everything's beautiful and perfect!"

Brosius nodded again. *Hallucinations, early stages,* he wrote. "And how long have you had this?" he asked mildly.

Peter looked at him in surprise. "Had what?"

"This sense of contentment after drinking."

"Oh, ever since the first time. Always."

"And how are you feeling now? Do you have nausea?"

"Yes. And I'm thirsty."

"You feel in need of an alcoholic drink?"

"No, water. Pure, clear water! Ice-cold water . . ."

Professor Brosius laid his ballpoint pen down on his pad. He's putting on an act now, he thought. Of course he craves alcohol! "I'll get them to bring you a bottle of mineral water, Mr. Kaul." He rose. "I'm pleased to have met you."

"Can I go home now?"

"Your wife will be here at three o'clock." Professor Brosius avoided giving a direct answer, but Peter's face lit up.

"Thank you, Professor. I knew you'd understand! Where can I wait?"

"Wait?"

"Wait till she comes to fetch me."

"Oh, I see. In your ward."

"With those dreadful people?"

Professor Brosius stiffened slightly. "Mr. Kaul," he said, "those people are unfortunate members of the human race. One of them was quite a distinguished academic. You'll soon get used to them."

Peter shrugged his shoulders, then nodded. He did not want to contradict the professor, and after all, it was only for a few hours.

Brosius waited till Peter had left, and then went out of another door. Father Merckel was waiting for him in the next room, sipping a glass of red wine.

"Well, what do you think of my protégé?" Merckel asked.

The professor sighed slightly. "Pleasant, quiet, polite." He took a cigar from a box. "But as we suspected, already severely psychotic, and starting to hallucinate as a result of his drinking."

"That's terrible!" The priest was genuinely horrified. "He's a most industrious worker, Professor; I've made inquiries, everyone says so. And then he drinks . . . out of fear, and a guilt complex he needn't suffer from at all. It's something he has persuaded himself into, as it were. Did he mention that?"

"No." Brosius lit his cigar. "You'd better tell me, Father."

Father Merckel looked at his hands. They were shaking . . . he needed another drink. "I can't betray his confidence," he said. "He'll have to tell you himself."

"He'll have to stay here for awhile. If we can dig deeper into his mind at the same time as drying him out, maybe we can deal with this problem you say lies behind the drinking. His wife is coming at three?"

"Yes, with the children."

"Does she know he must stay here?"

"I think she guesses. But I'll tell her." Father Merckel stood up. "She'll be bringing his clothes with her."

"Oh, for heaven's sake persuade her not to! My patients are safer in hospital clothing—I'm sure you understand that, Father. People are less likely to take an unofficial walk in State Mental Hospital pajamas!"

Peter and Judo Fritz were on their way back to Wing 3, coming up to Ward 70, when they heard a dreadful shriek. Two male nurses were dragging the man from Berlin out of the

room. His head was covered in blood, and he left a bloodstained trail behind him as they hauled him down the corridor by his shoulders.

"What the hell . . . ?" bellowed Fritz. Leaving Kaul standing there, he strode into Ward 70, to be met by a yell of fury from ten throats. Furniture had been smashed, beds overturned, two stools broken up and their legs used as weapons; they were lying on the floor smeared with blood.

"Sodding poofter!" someone shouted. "He was just asking for a good going-over! Assaulted Willi here, didn't he, the bastard?"

There were a couple of sharp slapping sounds. Peter could not see what was going on, but the noises conjured up a picture of weakened bodies being knocked off balance by Judo Fritz's strong fists and landing on the floor. There was a sudden silence, and the huge male nurse came back out into the corridor.

"Come on, Peter . . ."

Kaul stayed where he was. "No!" he said forcefully. "I won't go in there! I'm being let out at three, I don't want anything to do with those drunken swine!"

"You know, Peter, you shouldn't ought to have said that . . ." Judo Fritz sounded almost sorrowful. He reached out, took Kaul by the collar of his pajamas, lifted him like a kitten and carried him into the ward, where he suddenly let go. Peter was left sprawling on the floor by his bed. His companions roared with laughter, but one of them, a small, thin man, red-eyed like an angora rabbit, came over to him and bent down beside him.

"My name is Fassbender, Dr. Fassbender, I'm a lawyer. If you have any reason to complain of your treatment here, just call on my professional services. If I only had a piece of paper, what an indictment I could write! But there isn't any paper, even in the lavatories . . . someone must steal it every morning . . ."

Peter did not reply. He crawled into bed, lay down and pulled the covers over his head. Susanne will be coming at three, he consoled himself, she'll get me out of here, and I swear to God I'll never, never drink again!

Susanne had been shopping, stretching her credit at all the shops to its limit. She told people her husband was ill in the hospital, and she would pay off all their debts with his sick

benefits, and the sick leave pay he would get from the Marsellus works. Instead of the suspicion she had expected to encounter, she met with nothing but sympathy and helpfulness. She realized that the neighbors had seen through her world of illusion long ago, but she did not mind anymore. She was fighting for Peter now . . . against the authorities, the doctors, the neighbors, himself. She would never have believed that her revelation about Gundula could have shaken him so much he was ready to take his own life.

Punctually at three o'clock Susanne was at the gates of the mental hospital, with Petra and Heinz holding her hands. She had left Gundi with a neighbor. Following Father Merckel's instructions, she had only brought things to eat. She had had a case packed ready with Peter's clothes, but when Merckel told her he must stay in for a few more days, for observation, she left it at home.

The hospital had a visiting room, furnished with groups of tables and chairs. Relatives could not be expected to enter wards where patients who were intermittently lucid lived side by side with those in a state of delirium. Visits took place under the eyes of three strong male nurses, and they were usually short; there was seldom much to say after greetings had been exchanged and presents handed over. Once you landed up here in the alcoholics' wing of the mental hospital, you had taken the first step away from the ordinary world and into hell.

Susanne waited at a small table by a window, Petra and Heinz beside her, still clutching their mother's cold hands. They stared, wide-eyed, at the other tables, at emaciated figures, faces like death's heads, bony fingers, mummies preserved and yet drained by alcohol.

"Is Daddy as sick as them?" asked Petra in a low voice.

The door opened, and in came the bulky form of Judo Fritz, followed by Peter, a pitiable figure in his striped pajamas.

"Daddy!" shouted Petra and Heinz, letting go of Susanne's hands. Tears sprang to Susanne's eyes; through them she saw Peter's face, the face she still loved, and his eyes lighting up as he hugged the children.

"Peter," she stammered, "Peter . . ."

They looked at each other; her tears went to his heart. Overcoming his natural shyness in front of the male nurse, he

bent and kissed her. Her mouth tastes of salt, he thought, it's full of tears.

"My case, Susanne—give me the case!" he said hoarsely. "Where is it?"

"I've brought you some fresh fruit, Peter. Oranges, grapes, grapefruit—and some sausage, and a sultana cake, and—"

"My clothes, Susi!"

He stared at her, then glanced at the table. He saw her net shopping bag, full of packets and paper bags with the local shops' names on them, and he saw there was no case there at all.

"Susanne—where are my things?" he asked, louder this time. Judo Fritz came closer as several people at the other tables turned to look.

But Peter did not wait for an answer; Susanne's tears told him the truth. "They lied to me!" he shouted. "You want to leave me here to rot! In the lunatic asylum!" Before anyone could intervene he lunged at the table, sweeping the fruit and sausage and cake off it and flinging them at the wall. Then, feeling Fritz's heavy hand on his arm, he turned and rammed his head into the man's chest, screaming and screaming.

Petra and Heinz had backed away to the wall; they were crying. Susanne just stood there, her eyes blank, her mouth half open, imploring arms outstretched.

"I'm all right!" Kaul shouted. "I'll never drink again, I swear I won't, only for God's sake let me out of here! I'll be a different person, I'll..."

Judo Fritz took hold of him with both hands and dragged him, screaming, from the room. Next door two other male nurses held him down while Fritz gave him an injection of megaphene. Soon he became less violent, merely twitching now and then as he stared at the white-coated figures around him. His twisted mouth relaxed, his eyes rolled back. "Please..." he stammered. "I'll never drink again, never..."

Quite soon he was asleep, and they wheeled him back to his ward on a stretcher.

The houseman on duty said a few comforting words to Susanne before she left, walking very upright and carefully, just as Peter did when drunk. I know what I should do now, if it wasn't for the children, she thought as she sat in the bus going back to the city. They're my only reason to live any

longer. She stared out of the window, taking in nothing of what she saw. Then she leaned back and closed her eyes.

They'll certainly keep him in the hospital now, she thought. They'll treat him like the rest of those crazy drunks. The gates have closed behind him.

And why? Why? Dear God, why?

Petra gently touched her hand. "It's our stop, Mummy."

"Yes, darling."

They got out and walked back to the housing complex, a young woman marching along like a wooden soldier, with a child on either side, an experience she still did not fully grasp mirrored in her eyes.

Exactly how he did it was a mystery to the staff, but when the male nurse on night duty checked Ward 70 there was an empty bed.

Peter had escaped from the mental hospital.

At about three in the morning, when his absence was discovered, he was making his way through the quiet streets of Essen in his institution pajamas, keeping in the shelter of the house walls. He was not walking the streets aimlessly, he knew where he wanted to go, and the thought of it gave him energy.

He wanted to go home.

3

The closer Peter came to his own part of Essen, the faster he went, eventually breaking into a run. Home, he kept saying to himself, home! Not far now, around two more blocks, past the church and the rectory . . .

The rhythm of his stride faltered.

The rectory, he thought, stopping suddenly. Why hadn't the priest done anything for him? The priest had poured the drink into him, and it was after that Susanne told him the truth about Gundi, and he ran off to put an end to his life—and then there was the river, the dead fish with its silver belly, the cold water, the police, the hospital, Judo Fritz, that disgusting queer from Berlin in the next bed . . . it had been hell, and who had opened the gates of hell to let him in? Father Merckel!

Peter was breathing heavily; he wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand. Go on in and confront him, he told himself. Ask him: Why didn't you get me out of the hospital? Why did you keep quiet? Why didn't you tell Professor Brosius you got me drunk, you knew I was an alcoholic and still you kept giving me liquor—and drinking with me . . . ?

He stood by the rectory wall for some time, trying to decide whether to rouse the priest from his bed, or whether it was more important to get to Susanne and the children and the apartment, and wait and see what the next day would bring.

Finally he went on again, pounding along the new road through the complex. Another two hundred yards—one hundred yards—his own building.

He stopped and looked up at the windows of his apartment.

She'll be asleep, of course, he thought. It must be four in

the morning. But can a woman who loves her husband sleep when he's been carted off to the lunatic asylum? She should be pacing up and down, crying . . . but she *is* asleep, though, he thought. All the windows are dark, not a light anywhere in the building except in the Wollenwebers' apartment, and that's natural enough, that's their eldest, Lisa, earning a bit on the side same as usual, in bed.

The front door of the building itself was not locked. Peter crept up the stairs to the door of his own apartment. He hesitated for a moment, then put his finger on the bell. A light went on in the hall. He heard Heinz getting out of bed, saying, "Don't open the door, Mummy! I'm scared!" He pressed the bell again. Petra was in the hall now too; he heard her saying, "Shall I go to the window and call for help, Mummy?" And then there was Susanne's voice, saying quietly, "No, Petra, wait. It might be someone with news of Daddy." Oh, Susanne, thought Peter, open the door!

Steps approaching. Susanne's voice asking, "Who's there?" Heinz saying, "You can open it now, Mummy. Petra's going to stand by the window, and if there's any trouble I'll just say, 'Yes!' and she'll shout for help."

My good children! Peter felt tears come to his eyes. Little Heinz, trying to be so brave! He's a good lad, he'll turn out better than his father.

The door creaked. There was a sound of a key turning, the slight squeal of the hinges, then light from the hall fell out on the stairs, showing the man standing there in his striped hospital pajamas.

Susanne and Peter stared at each other, their conscious minds unable to grasp it at first; then their brains began working again . . .

It's Peter!

I'm home!

Oh, my God . . . he's run away!

How lovely you look, Susanne . . . I've never seen you look so pretty! With your big eyes and long hair, your slim body in that old dressing gown, your slender ankles. Susanne, you're beautiful, and you're my wife . . .

"Daddy!" cried Heinz. "It's Daddy!" Petra, coming out of the bedroom to find out why she was not, after all, to shout for help, stared in amazement when she saw her father.

"Come in, Peter," said Susanne gently.

As Peter stepped into his apartment, putting an arm around each of the children, he felt happier than he had ever been in his life.

I'll never, never touch a drop again, he swore to himself once more.

They came for him quite early in the morning.

Two vehicles stopped outside the building, and Peter saw them get out. First there was a car, containing the senior consultant from the mental hospital, two policemen, and Father Merckel. Then there was a dull green van, like a station wagon except for the fact that its back window was barred, and there was a wire grill behind the driver's seat. Judo Fritz got out of it, stretching his powerful body. A second man in a white coat joined him, smoking a cigarette and glancing first at the four men from the car, then up at the building.

Peter stepped back from the window, his face white as chalk.

"They've come!" he said hoarsely. He clung to Susanne's shoulder, his fingernails digging in through her dressing gown. She took his head in both hands and kissed him, then laid her face against his chest, in tears.

"I guessed they would. They've got the law on their side, Peter."

"Susi, don't let them in!" Kaul begged.

"But they know you're here..."

"How can they know?" He held her very close. "I could have gone anywhere—back to the river..."

"They'll have looked there."

Steps came up the stairs, a great many firm footsteps. Petra and Heinz came out of the kitchen, where they had been drinking their cocoa; they had a big mug every morning before they started out for school. They stood in the hall, watching in alarm as their father embraced their mother, burying his face in her hair, and crying. Really crying—lips trembling, shoulders heaving, big tears streaming down his face. There were voices outside the door, and a lot of feet shuffling. Someone rang the bell, someone else hammered on the door itself.

"What... what do those people want, Daddy?" asked Heinz.

"Open that door!" a brusque voice called outside. The tones of officialdom again. Peter said nothing. Nor did the children;

they both hugged their father, and the four of them stood there clustered together like a bunch of grapes.

More knocking on the door, followed by a quiet but heated discussion. Then the bell rang again, briefly, and someone spoke in a deep, avuncular voice. Judo Fritz.

"Open up, Peter!" He must have had his mouth to the crack of the door, for his voice sounded as close as if he were standing right beside Kaul, who jumped, disengaged himself from Susanne and the children, and went over to the door. But he still did not answer.

Judo Fritz tried again. "Now don't make trouble, Peter. Come along! The professor will give you a nice room all to yourself!"

Well, that was a lie for certain! A private room would cost some twenty-five dollars a day, even without the professor's personal attention. And of course there would be all sorts of extras: doctor's visits, nurses, medication, use of examination rooms, X-rays, electrocardiogram, encephalogram, analysis of body fluids, laboratory facilities, arteriogram . . . it could come to a hundred dollars a day in the private wing!

Peter leaned against the door. He felt as though he could sense the warmth of Judo Fritz's body on the other side; thinking of Father Merckel, out there too, he imagined he could smell incense as well. Incense and schnapps—odd that no one at St. Christopher's had ever worked out the components of that smell.

"I'm not coming," Peter said suddenly.

"Look, Peter, don't be a fool." Kind Uncle Fritz talking again. "You're only in for observation! Got to keep the law, haven't we? Even in the nut house. So come on out!" Here, however, the avuncular Fritz made a clumsy mistake, adding in equally friendly but perfectly clear tones, "Don't want the police breaking this door down, do you, Peter?"

"You bloody let them try it!" Peter hammered on the door himself. "Go on, then!" he shouted. "Kick it in! Try it, you bastards! I'm right here in the doorway, you're not coming into this apartment, and if you think you can come and get me with tear gas, or call the fire department and their ladders . . . I'll do myself in, you hear? And my wife too, and the children, all three of them. Petra, Heinz, Gundula. That makes five of us, so you'd better put in an order for five coffins before you try breaking down this door!"

Everything was suddenly quiet outside. There was a para-

lysing silence inside the apartment too. Into this silence Susanne spoke, quite clearly and calmly. "Yes, he's right. We shall all go with him."

Now for the priest, thought Peter. He nodded to Susanne, a nod of thanks. Sure enough, another voice spoke up, deep, powerful, fluent. Father Merckel! Very well, thought Peter, now for a few words on doing God's will and going back to that hell hole with them.

"Mr. Kaul, I promise that you'll be allowed to go again, after you have had a thorough examination," said Father Merckel. "I've spoken to Professor Brosius; I assure you no one will harm you. Think of your family, and what will happen to them if you continue to be uncooperative."

"If you come in here there won't be any family left!" shouted Peter. "Go away!"

There was more whispering out on the stairs. Kaul could make out the priest's deep voice muttering something, and the avuncular tones of Judo Fritz. They seemed to be disagreeing. The doctor put a word in now and then, there were a couple of sharp remarks from the policemen, then it was the priest again. Peter put his ear to the door. He heard footsteps going away, going downstairs, and a woman's voice down below. Mrs. Plotzke on the ground floor, eager with frustrated curiosity. Peter ran to the bedroom. Out in the street they were getting into the car and the van. Both vehicles drove off.

But Father Merckel had not been down there. That meant he was still in the building. Waiting outside the door, thought Kaul grimly. My friendly drinking companion, waiting for me!

"It's a trap, Susi," he said, letting the curtain drop back. "They want to lull me into a sense of security. They've gone around the corner to wait, or else they've gone for reinforcements to smoke us out. Oh God, why did I have to do this to you? I'm not fit to live, am I?"

"You're my husband, Peter," said Susanne. "You're the father of my children, and we love you. Isn't that a good enough reason to live?"

"You're an angel," he said softly. He straightened up, went over to the window again, and saw some of the neighbors standing at their doorways, heads together, looking up at the Kauls' apartment. What a mob, he thought. Longing for a sensation. They'd love to see me dragged away by Judo Fritz!

"I'll go if you say I should, Susi," he said. "I promise you,

I'll go of my own free will, but you must say: Yes, please go, Peter."

"No!" She almost screamed the word. Heinz and Petra came into the bedroom. Out in the kitchen, Gundula began to cry. Peter listened; the sound cut him to the heart. There was the living proof of his inadequacy. A child with useless legs and a dead brain inside her head.

"I'll go," he said dully. "You'd be happier without me." He went out of the bedroom. Susanne ran after him and caught up with him just as he was about to unbolt the door of the apartment.

"No, Peter!" she shouted desperately. "No!"

Peter freed himself from Susanne, unlocked the door and let it swing open. "Why, look who's out here! Our good friend the priest!" He made a deep bow. "Come in, Father, and preach God's word to us!"

Merckel came in, shutting the door behind him. The children, pressed close to the wall, saw a strange scene: their father was slapping the priest on the shoulder, saying, "Got a bottle in your pocket, by any chance?" Then he laughed raucously, went into the kitchen, switched on the light, since it was not yet broad daylight outside, flung himself into a chair and crossed his legs. The priest sat down opposite him; Susanne remained standing beside the shelf where she kept her houseplants: primulas, Busy Lizzies, African violets.

"Must the children hear this?" asked Merckel, looking at Heinz and Petra.

"Why not? They've seen their father drunk, why shouldn't they see what comes of it?"

Father Merckel looked at his watch. "Time for school, surely?" he said. "Off you go, and be good, children."

Heinz and Petra hesitated, looking at their father. "Will Daddy still be here when we get back?" Heinz asked.

"No." Father Merckel planted his hands on his knees. "But you'll soon be seeing him again. Now, run along."

When the children had gone, the priest leaned back in his chair. "Why did you run away, Peter? It was a stupid thing to do! They'd soon have let you out—at that stage there were no actual committal proceedings underway, but there will be now. First trying to throw yourself into the Ruhr, then running off! Is that any way to solve your problems and help your family? I thought you were basically sound, Peter; I knew liquor had a hold on you, but I did think you were basically

sound. You and I know *why* you drink, but even there you were stupid—can't you see it's better to face facts than flay yourself alive?" Suddenly he leaned over the table and grabbed Kaul by the shirt. "Well, *are* you a man, or are you so sodden with liquor you're nothing but a coward?" he demanded in his powerful voice.

Peter shook himself free. He was pale now, and his eyes darted from side to side. He stared at Susanne, seeing the same question in her own eyes. Earlier, she had been ready to die with him and the children, but now the priest was here she had changed. She felt hope revive in her, and strength, the strength that had enabled her to live with him, love him, bear his children and be happy now and then.

"All right, Father," said Peter quietly. "Let's go, before I change my mind."

There was a certain amount of discussion before Kaul put on his best suit, let Susanne tie a gray-blue tie in a Windsor knot for him, found his black Italian shoes, washed his hands again, carefully cleaning away a rim of black from the middle fingernail of his left hand, and combed his hair. All in all, he looked like a prosperous citizen off to church on a Sunday, or off to a concert, an exhibition, a walk in the park—or to a football game, or a brothel.

Susanne was sitting on the bed, weeping uncontrollably. Not even the priest's comforting hand on her shoulder could stop her paroxysms of tears. Peter took her face in his hands, kissed her wet eyes and salty mouth, stroked her fair hair, then—look away for a moment, Father—stroked her breasts with the palm of his hand.

"Think of me," he said hesitantly. "Tell the children I'll soon be back, and I'll bring them a present."

Kaul and Merckel walked to the police station side by side, in silence. Once there they had to talk for quite some time before they could find anyone with the authority to deal with their request.

The problem they represented was unusual, and had no precedent in the statute books. Here was a man known to be an alcoholic, an attempted suicide, broken out of the State Mental Hospital, asking to be incarcerated in prison. When remonstrated with and told it was impossible, he said simply, "I'm not going back to the lunatic asylum, and I shall do my very best to injure anyone who tries to take me there, and *that* will get me into jail, right?"

It was tricky. Various lawyers were appealed to, Merckel himself spoke to the district attorney, and eventually it turned out that the case might just come into the category of preventive custody.

"Well, I suppose you're in luck, Kaul," said Father Merckel cheerfully. "So you *can* go to prison instead of back to the hospital if that's what you really want—though I can't think why you should."

"If I can't be at home, I don't want to be shut up with madmen and perverts," said Kaul.

An hour later they arrived at the prison admissions office. Yet more questions, since Kaul had nothing in the way of documents authorizing his committal. "You can't get into jail just like that!" said the duty sergeant at the desk. "We'd be bursting at the seams, mate! Free board and lodging, free medical attention, variety program on the television once a week . . . there's lots are better off in here than outside, right, Father?"

But then things began to move fast. A farewell handshake with Father Merckel, a bath, questions about crab lice and whether one had ever had VD, issue of prison clothing, interview with the officer in charge of the second floor block, issue of a number: 112c. The 112 was the number of his cell, he had not realized he would be sharing a cell, but when he got there he found he was No. 112c because Nos. 112a and 112b were already in occupation.

The door closed behind him, a bolt grated. He looked inquiringly at his two cellmates and then introduced himself: "Peter Kaul—electrician."

No. 112a rose and bowed. "Franz Lukasch—sexual offences!"

So did No. 112b. "Emil Hangelar—breaking and entering!"

Then they looked at each other and roared with laughter. "You're a real weirdo, aren't you?" gasped Lukasch at last. "Why didn't you get 'em to issue you a dinner jacket while you were at it?" He went up to Kaul, who was staring rigidly ahead. "Come on, then, what *are* you in for?"

"Suicide," said Kaul, dully. "Attempted suicide."

Nos. 112a and 112b stared at each other again, mutually agreeing that they had just acquired a genuine nut case for a cellmate. "Gawd!" said Hangelar, rolling his eyes heavenward. "Miscarriage of justice, if you ask me!"

Kaul's first day in prison was not very pleasant, but compared with Judo Fritz's ward he thought it was paradise.

Those who knew Dr. Konrad Lingen, the brain surgeon, well could justifiably feel some envy of him. Fortune had lavished her gifts upon him. He was successful, wealthy, with a private clinic of his own, and beds in three other hospitals; he had an international reputation, the courts valued him highly as an expert witness, he had a beautiful, elegant wife, Brigitte, a sixteen-year-old daughter, Viola, studying for her high school examinations, he was the author of two textbooks, on psychiatry and on traumatic surgery, he was a good tennis player who had won a number of cups, he had a motorboat on Lake Maggiore, he was a horseman and a keen hunter, with a small roomful of trophies in his villa in the country, he drove a sports car, was blessed with a face and figure that turned nurses and women patients alike to jelly . . . what more could Dr. Lingen ask of life? His operations were filmed, when he gave a course of lectures the lecture room was crammed, he was idolized and hated—in short, he was a great man.

Dr. Lingen had quickly forgotten little Gundula Kaul; there were thousands of such children around, and many more thousands hidden away from the world in institutions, forgotten by their parents, dependent on the state or on charitable organizations, nightmare beings ranging from mumbling idiots to mongoloids, from crawling creatures like insects to pulsating lumps of flesh. Dr. Lingen had ceased to find the contemplation of such children horrible or tragic. They were just numbers, medical notes, temperature charts. Some of them did not even have names, but were known only by the nature of their afflictions or the numbers of their hospital beds.

So why should he have remembered Gundula Kaul?

This morning, Lingen's working day began as usual. The porter at the Lingen Clinic saw his white sports car on its way, and pressed a button to let all the staff know the boss was here. The head nurse and senior surgeon were waiting for Dr. Lingen by the time he emerged from his room, in his white, starched coat, white shoes and white linen slacks. The clip of a gold ballpoint pen gleamed in his left breast pocket.

"Anything special?" he asked briefly.

"No—except for a phone call, five minutes ago. A crash on the motorway; they wanted the accident victim transferred

here, but we passed it on to the Bergmannsheil hospital." The senior surgeon took a quick look at his notepad. "A man called Hatzenbach. Two cars, meeting head on. The police say he has severe skull injuries . . ."

"Hatzenbach?" asked Dr. Lingen. His handsome face hardened, and a frown marred his good looks. "Consul Hinrich Hatzenbach?"

"I don't know. Hinrich *was* the name—"

"Then you should know!" shouted Dr. Lingen suddenly. "Consul Hatzenbach is a friend of mine—a member of the riding club. Managing director of United Steel, and you turn him away and send him to the Bergmannsheil? For heaven's sake phone them, find out if he's fit to be moved, and get him here to me—and hurry!"

He turned on his heel and went back into his room. Doctor and nurse looked inquiringly at each other, their glances silently asking: Which of us rings our colleagues at the Bergmannsheil to tell them Consul Hinrich Hatzenbach is a patient of Dr. Lingen's after all?

"Oh, I'll ring!" said the nurse, smiling wryly. "They aren't quite so likely to sound off at a woman!"

An hour later an ambulance drew up in the forecourt. Everything was ready in the operating theater. The other hospital's diagnosis was straightforward enough: fracture of the skull, bone splinters in the brain, as yet impossible to judge the extent of brain damage. They sounded quite glad to have Dr. Lingen take this patient off their hands.

There was no time for another really thorough series of X-ray checks. Hatzenbach's pulse was weak, his breathing shallow and irregular.

Dr. Lingen sat in his room while the patient was prepared for the operation. His mail contained a list of names: people on whom the courts wanted an expert's psychiatric report. The list made grim reading. It involved one murder, two possible declarations of incapacity in law, one rape, four committals to drying-out institutions, one severe cerebral sclerosis. And yet all this was run-of-the-mill stuff. Lingen ran his eye briefly over the list.

Kaul, he thought. Peter Kaul. Where have I come across that name before?

He tried to remember, but his mind was searching in the wrong social sphere, among the company directors, doctors and influential engineers of his acquaintance. He marked the

name with a small red cross, to remind him to look in his card index. Kaul? They wanted a report on the man's chronic alcoholism. Wasn't there a Kaul at the tennis club, chief agent for a distilling company?

The telephone buzzed discreetly. He picked it up; the operating theater reported everything ready. "Patient under anesthetic; rather tricky because of his pulse. We're giving constant heart stimulation," the nurse told him.

"Thanks." Lingen put down the phone and rose to his feet.

In the theater, they were all waiting for him, and when he came in and went to scrub up, he guessed he had a difficult operation ahead. The senior surgeon and his chief assistant were standing silently around the operating table, a nurse sat on a stool beside the instruments board. It's like a wake, thought Lingen, rinsing his hands and arms in hot water. Hands still dripping, he went to look at the gaping skull wound in Hatzenbach's head. The top of the skull was caved in and splintered, exposing part of the pink and grey brain tissue. He viewed it dispassionately; once one knew how little of the brain a man needed in order to live, an open skull became less dramatic.

"Start trephining, Kruger," Dr. Lingen told the senior surgeon. "Make the aperture large enough, then I'll take over."

He went back to the basin and dried his hands and arms on a sterile towel. As he did so, he tested the reactions and sensitivity of his fingertips. They were his most important, indeed his all-important asset. Operating on the brain, groping among its threadlike nerves, one's fingers require the sensitivity of an electric probe. The life of a patient may depend upon the surgeon's sense of touch.

Dr. Lingen cast another quick glance at the operating table. Dr. Kruger was trephining. Instruments clinked, now and then there was a murmured word, or a hand stretched out in a silent request for an instrument. Forceps, swab, clamp, saw, electric knife . . .

Dr. Lingen tapped his fingertips together once more. Very, very gently he stroked the white tiles by the basin, giving them the merest touch. As he did so, an expression of panic came into his eyes, his face hardened, his lips narrowed to a thin line. He walked quickly out of the operating theater, as if to escape the necessity of approaching the opened skull.

Dr. Kruger and the nurse exchanged quick glances above their masks. What, again? those glances said. He goes out of

the theater just before every big operation, and when he comes back he looks on top of the world, he's bubbling over with high spirits, while his fingers perform surgical extravaganzas, miracles such as no one else could achieve. But fortune was Konrad Lingen's friend, and his reputation was growing all the time.

Dr. Kruger went on trephining. He has to take some kind of stimulant, he thought. Does he inject morphine, sniff cocaine, take a drink? No one had yet caught him at this mysterious activity of his, since those in a position to do so were busy at the operating table at the time.

The sliding door was pushed back again, and Dr. Lingen rejoined them, with a springy, elastic tread, eyes sparkling, almost enjoying the prospect of the task ahead.

"Excellent, Kruger!" he said, bending over Consul Hatzenbach's opened skull. "Do you know, this man uses that very brain to control a concern employing thirty thousand people! We either preserve his brain to keep working for the national economy, or we make him a babbling infant with a sixty-year-old body." He put out his hand, and the nurse gave him the finest possible probe. "I think and hope we shall be able to return him to his firm as good as ever . . ."

And he proceeded to operate so skillfully that even Dr. Kruger felt one could not help admiring and liking a man of such genius.

That afternoon Dr. Lingen went to the State Mental Hospital. He had not found records of any private patient called Kaul in his card index, so he lost interest in the Kaul on his list. There had been a Dr. Kauler in the index—almost the same name, which could account for his mistake—but he had died a year ago, a distressing case of meningitis diagnosed too late.

He hoped to get through all those patients in the hospital who were on his list that afternoon, starting with the two women: one alcoholic, one who had had an application for a declaration of legal incapacity made against her. Those two would be quick. One simply let women talk, asking a leading question now and then, and the words gushed out.

The women's section of the hospital was quite separate from the rest of it. A complex of three large buildings, surrounded by high walls, lay at the very edge of the grounds. They housed two hundred and forty-eight mental patients and a hundred and forty-nine alcoholics. No men were allowed in except for doc-

tors and the hospital chaplain; even family visitors, if they were male, had to wait in the main hospital building to see their relatives there.

But Dr. Lingen was a familiar figure in the women's section. The matron met him, and told him his two patients were bathing, and would be ready in a quarter of an hour.

"Good." Dr. Lingen turned up his coat collar. "Then I'll take a stroll in the garden; I can do with a breath of fresh air. A whole morning spent operating... I'm not as young as I was."

He smiled with such charm that the matron was tempted to reassure him he was quite as young and vigorous as he needed to be, and a glance from his candid eyes could melt any woman's heart. She hurried back into the building instead. It was difficult to remain as sexless and impersonal as a hospital matron should be when Konrad Lingen was around.

Dr. Lingen walked around the central flowerbed of roses and dahlias three times, stopping now and then to breathe deeply. I'll go out riding on Sunday, he thought, I need fresh air!

"It does you good, doesn't it?" said a voice behind him. A clear, musical voice, sweet and almost childlike in tone.

Dr. Lingen swung around. He had thought he was alone in the garden, but he saw a girl sitting on a bench by the hedge. She smiled at him and rose, smoothing down her skirt over her long, slender legs. Her hair was pale gold, flowing down over her shoulders like a golden mantilla and framing a face which radiated an extraordinary magic: it combined the purity of childhood with a concealed and very feminine maturity.

"You must be a doctor or a pastor," the girl commented, "or they wouldn't give you the run of the place like this! Good afternoon, doctor."

"Good... good afternoon," replied Dr. Lingen, in some confusion.

She walked toward the building. It was not so much a walk as an act of temptation, a challenge, a cry of lust and an invitation. A seductive current of electricity seemed to flow from her swaying hips and breasts, her long legs, her pale gold hair blowing in the breeze.

Dr. Lingen stared as she walked away. His throat felt dry. He walked over to the bench where she had been sitting, and sat down himself. It was as if he could still feel the warmth of her body where her thighs had touched the wood.

She did not look back as she went into the building. The matron came to the door and looked out. "Dr. Lingen!" she called. "We're ready, doctor."

Dr. Lingen did not move. He had always been aware of the way his own mere touch could arouse a woman, even when he was only trying to make a diagnosis, but now he felt a new, strange stirring within himself, as if some magician had passed a hand over his eyes, causing him to see the world quite differently. Whether it looked better or not he did not know. He had seen a fallen star, an angel who looked like a devil, and he felt an urge to tear that angel apart in an unbridled ecstasy of ferocious lust—an urge that swept aside all the inhibitions of scruples and morality.

"Dr. Lingen!" the matron called again.

He jumped up abruptly, and to the matron's speechless astonishment ran toward the building straight across the flowerbed, crushing the dahlias and brushing past the rose bushes.

He was not running to keep his appointments—he was running after his angel. He felt like Icarus climbing to the sun to defeat the gods.

That same day, in Block V of the prison, Peter Kaul, No. 112c, on remand, was knocked cold by his cellmate, Emil Hangelar, No. 112b, breaking and entering. He was taken to the prison hospital.

They had quarreled over nothing much: an argument as to whether a girl of fourteen, assuming she was past puberty, should be treated exactly the same as a girl of twenty. Emil Hangelar offered it as his opinion that they all felt the same whether they were twenty or fourteen. Peter had replied, "Well, I've got a twelve-year-old daughter, and when I think *you* could be trying to seduce her in a couple of years' time I could murder you!"

That did it. The new arrival was already considered crazy by his cellmates—but as for threats and moral sermons! Hangelar hit out. Being a large and powerful man, he flung Peter against the wall and onto the floor like a sack of potatoes. Then he and Lukasch hammered on the door until a warden came, and told him Kaul had been making homosexual advances.

Peter was taken off to the hospital, where his injuries were treated and his statement taken down. Not that anyone believed it; the prison officers all knew what alcoholics were like. Un-

predictable, they were, so befuddled they didn't much care if hey had it with a woman or a man. One old alcoholic they'd ad in the jail even did it with a sheep. Filthy perverts, they were!

In the prison hospital, Peter stole a bottle of alcohol, 96 ercent proof, from the drugs cupboard, diluted it with water nd drank himself senseless. He was found unconscious in bed he next morning. The room reeked like a seafront pub.

The prison authorities called the State Mental Hospital at nce to say they were sending him back; he would be safer here. No one bothered to ask exactly why Kaul had had to get drunk. They took the easiest course, and handed him back to he tender care of Judo Fritz.

4

Judo Fritz was standing at the hospital entrance as the green police van drew up in the forecourt. His face positively glowed as he took charge of Peter, placing a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Well, well, so here we are again!" he said cheerfully, patting Kaul's pale cheek. "And a promise is a promise: you get a room to yourself, on the first floor!" He added, in confidential tones, "You know something? The church is paying for it! So you get a nice soft bed, and the professor to take your pulse himself, and a nurse to empty your chamberpot—that's the life, eh? And you wanted to go to jail instead! You're a lot better off with old Uncle Fritz . . ." Judo Fritz took Kaul under the arms and dragged, rather than led, him into the building. "Putting back pure alcohol, what a thing to do! Should know better at your age."

Defenseless, eyes half closed, just an unresisting lump of flesh, Peter submitted to the various procedures of admission to the hospital: enema, glass of water with a powder in it (this was aversion therapy: after taking the powder the mere smell of alcohol made you throw up), warm shower, genital checkup ("Got to sweep in all the corners, haven't we?" said Fritz), issue of the striped pajamas with the monogram on the breast pocket. Finally, the room and the bed: a soft mattress, a sheet, a quilt in a cotton cover, sterile whiteness, a faint smell of bleach and chlorine and detergents. But then, peace . . . heavenly peace! The blessed relief of being able to lie and rest, with no

one else in the room, no other patients talking, pissing in the bucket, trying to pick a quarrel, going off to the lavatories to masturbate after lights out. No dirt, no human stinks, nothing: just sleep. Peter burrowed into his bed and slept deeply, contentedly, like an exhausted child.

Next morning the world did not look quite so good. He heard the familiar shout of "Get up!" in the wards overhead, on the second floor. Then the trampling of feet. Judo Fritz had given the order to go and wash. That meant it was six thirty. One did not need an alarm clock in the hospital. Tin mugs clattering in the dining room upstairs meant seven thirty, mops on the stairs meant nine, and the cleaners were at work, silence meant eleven o'clock, time for the doctors to do their rounds.

Peter sat in bed, waiting. Any moment the door would open and someone would shout "Get up!" Then he would have to leave his bed, find his washing things and go out into the corridor.

But no one came and shouted at him, and he even discovered a tiled corner in his room with a wash basin, a mirror, a shelf under the mirror and a bathmat beside the basin. Miracle upon miracle!

He went to the window. Barred, of course. Whether you were in a private room or a ward, you were still an alcoholic, little better than an animal. But the bars here were not so thick as those in the ward, there were curtains to soften the sight of them, and they were painted white, which gave them an almost decorative look.

Peter glanced at his face in the mirror. You look terrible, he thought, pale as a half-baked roll. He got washed, avoiding looking in the mirror again, since he felt like spitting at what he saw there, but that was something he must not do. The professor would probably interpret it as a psychotic urge to self-destruction, so he kept his self-disgust to himself.

When the noise upstairs died down, and the alcoholics, the delirious and feeble-minded patients were seated at the clean tables, eating breakfast, Judo Fritz came into Kaul's room. He was surprised to find his patient washed and dressed, sitting quietly in a chair, hands flat on his knees.

"You up already?" said Judo Fritz. "You can lie in bed longer, you know. Young Hannes will bring you your breakfast and take your temperature. Hey, you look surprised!" He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at Peter as if he were

some interesting species of bird. "They say you're an electrician, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Want to do some work?" Judo Fritz leaned forward. "On the side, like. In a private room like this, you can stay wrapped in cotton wool if that's your fancy. Wouldn't suit me, though. I guess you'd be happier if you could work."

"Yes," said Peter, with a spark of interest.

"I'm building myself a house, see?" Judo Fritz beamed with pride. "A bungalow, it is. Windows right down to the ground, terrace, flat roof, the whole thing, just like in Florida. I've been getting along slowly, adding a bit now and then, and it's just about got to the wiring stage—like to do the job?"

"Yes."

"The professor needn't know, he'll only see you on his rounds, we don't get the senior consultant around here much either, and the houseman's a friend of mine, I did him a favor over his girl once. So that sees to *him*. I'll take you around to my place after lunch and you can get to work—but no drinking, mind."

"I shall never drink again," said Peter, quietly.

"So what was the idea in jail, then?"

"I wanted to get out of there—away from those men . . ."

"Decided you like it better here after all, then?"

Peter hunched his shoulders as if he were freezing. "Everywhere is hell," he said, his voice dull. "It's just a question of finding the best corner."

Susanne and the children were waiting for news from the prison. Father Merckel had gone away for a week, to a theological conference; what no one knew was that Merckel's "conference" took place in a small Sauerland village, where he had booked into an inn, and where he spent the daylight hours drinking. At night, however, he hardly slept—only a brief three hours—but sat with a stack of paper in front of him, working on a book in his steep, vigorous handwriting. It was to be entitled *A Priest Speaks!* and was a book of sermons, powerful, rousing stuff: a philippic against drink, a condemnation of the evils of alcohol—a cry to God for help. He had to be drunk in order to write it.

In Merckel's absence, Susanne could only wait for news of Peter. He did not write; she thought he was ashamed to. He

was probably waiting for her to make the first approach, to visit him and reassure him that everything would be all right for them in the end.

She had also had a curious encounter. Her doorbell rang the day after Kaul went to prison, and a stranger was standing outside, hat in hand, smiling like a vacuum cleaner salesman. Susanne was about to tell him, "I'm afraid we don't need anything," when he asked, "Can I have a word with Mr. Kaul?"

"No, he's not well," said Susanne. "What was it you wanted?"

"In bed, is he?"

"Yes, he's—he's in the hospital."

"Oh. That's a shame." The man put his hat back on again. What a foxy face he has, she thought. "Was it an accident?"

"Yes. Who are you? Are you from the health insurance people?"

"No, no . . . my name's Hubert Bollanz. That won't mean anything to you, Mrs. Kaul, but when you visit your husband, please mention that I called. I'm an old friend, I just wanted to say hello . . ."

And the stranger left. Susanne had never seen or heard of him before, Peter had never said a word about him, but she remembered the name. Hubert Bollanz.

That was another reason why, after some days had passed, Susanne left little Gundula with a neighbor while Heinz and Petra were at school, and took the bus to the prison.

"Name?" asked the sergeant on duty at the gate.

"Mrs. Kaul. I want to see my husband, Peter Kaul."

"Got an appointment? Where's your visitor's pass?"

"I . . . I don't have one." Susanne was confused. "You mean I need one—but why?"

"Look, you can't just walk in here and say you want to see this Kaul! We're not a hotel, you know. I'm not a hotel doorman!" The sergeant was getting annoyed. What was the world coming to, he asked himself? No respect for authority these days! "How long has your husband been inside?"

"Only a few days."

"Oh, I see." The sergeant softened. You had to make allowances when they were new at it, didn't know the ropes. "Look, you need to apply for a visitor's pass. Better get your lawyer to do it. You do have a lawyer?"

"No."

"Legal aid, was it?" Susanne shook her head. "No legal aid either?"

"No. My husband won't be here for long."

Something rang a faint bell in the sergeant's mind. Looking at the records inside his lodge, he saw that Peter had been taken away to the State Mental Hospital. A nut case, that's what he was. The sergeant closed the record book, trying to conceal his embarrassment. That's the powers that be for you, he thought, idle as they come, transfer the man and don't even bother to tell his wife. She could probably claim damages! Good thing there's official jargon I can use to get them off the hook.

"Your husband's case is still proceeding," said the sergeant, very dignified.

"What?" said Susanne, in some alarm.

"Proceeding. That means, his transfer's being placed on file and they'll be writing you a letter in due course."

"His transfer?" Susanne swayed on her feet, suddenly feeling sick. Oh, my God, she thought. Transfer—and I'm feeling sick, I've been feeling sick for some time in the mornings. And I know what that means, after three children. Dear God, don't let it be true. Not another Gundula growing inside me!

"That's right—transfer to the State Mental Hospital." The sergeant caught hold of Susanne to support her, brushing her breasts as he did so. Nice little piece, he thought—how come the prettiest ones always go for the kind of bastards we get in here? Must be some kind of smell about them!

"But . . . but that's awful," Susanne managed to say. "He couldn't stand the idea of the hospital. He'll go mad there, he'll turn violent, and then what shall we do? He'll never get better in there—the place will really drive him crazy!"

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders. Don't you worry, he was thinking, they'll know how to deal with him there if he starts lashing out. Pity, too . . . a pretty little thing like this!

Susanne stood outside the prison as if paralyzed. She could not take it in at first. But once she was able to think more clearly, a bitter suspicion came into her mind. They cheated him, she thought. Even the priest cheated him! They took him to the prison, and once they were sure they had him safe they moved him to the hospital. They cheated Peter—my poor Peter! She ran to the nearest bus stop, hardly sparing a thought for the fact that the children would soon be out of school and home

for lunch, and took the bus into the city center. Then she got the bus to the State Mental Hospital.

I'll show them, she thought, clenching her fists. I'll tell them exactly what I think of them!

Peter had spent the better part of two days working on Judo Fritz's bungalow. All went well; no one noticed his absence. After lunch Judo Fritz escorted him out of the hospital grounds, describing him as a "harmless" patient to the porter, and left him at the bungalow; he fetched him back before supper, taking a look around, patting him on the back with an approving, "Good work, Peter!" and had him in the hospital again in time for his temperature to be taken.

He had seen Professor Brosius once, the day after his return to the hospital. "I'm glad we shall be seeing more of each other, Mr. Kaul," the professor said, looking hard into Kaul's eyes and noting the lingering effects of that bottle of 96 percent alcohol. He nodded, and made a quick note which nobody else could read. Nor, in fact, could Brosius, but that was not the point; making notes in front of the patient inspires confidence, and that in itself is an important factor in a cure. Once a seventy-year-old woman patient had insisted on reading his scribble, and Brosius had showed it to her. *Diagnosa deflorata*, he had written: a completely meaningless phrase. The old lady smiled uncertainly. "Is that serious, Professor?" she asked. "Perfectly normal, my dear lady!" Brosius answered, with conviction.

He wrote down no words while talking to Peter, just scribbled, asked Fritz, "Any observations?" and Fritz shook his head. "Have you been having any more hallucinations?" he asked Kaul, and when Kaul too shook his head, Brosius left, satisfied.

Dr. Lingen was a different matter. He visited Kaul on the third day after his return, to examine him for the psychiatric report required by the courts. Dr. Lingen did not produce any instruments, examine his eyes or test for reflexes. He just talked. However, Peter felt instinctively that this amiable and good-looking doctor could be dangerous. He considered every answer he gave Lingen carefully. Stumped by the question, "What would you do if you won two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the lottery—build a house, buy a pub, go on a cruise?" he answered hesitantly, "I'd give my wife the money. I mean,

whatever Susanne did with it, I know it would be all right." That kind of answer had Lingen stumped.

"No permanent brain damage," he noted down. "Psychogenic reflexions only under the influence of alcohol. Prospects of a cure are good, given complete withdrawal of alcohol and the patient's own cooperation."

From his room, Peter watched Dr. Lingen (his adversary, as he thought of him) leave, and walk over the lawn below the white-barred window, through the gate in the high wall, over to the women's section. Here in the men's wards amazing tales were told of what went on in that section, randy fantasies figuring prominently, but even Judo Fritz had been known to say, "I'd rather deal with a hundred men than three of those! They get some weird notions when they've been months without a man!" Then he stopped, and would say no more; it must be grim indeed over in the women's section.

This was the same day that Susanne turned up at the hospital, and learned for the first time that Peter had a private room, and the church was paying for his treatment—at this she began to shed tears in her delight and amazement. However, it was necessary for all visits to be authorized by Professor Brosius himself, and on Fridays Brosius always went riding, letting his thwarted cavalry ambitions break out. This being a Friday, Susanne was told to come back the next day.

"Can I leave something for my husband, then?" she asked.

"Yes, of course, madam."

Madam. You got called madam if your husband was in a private room. All included in the fees. Susanne handed over a bag of grapes, and Peter had them for his supper, sharing them with Judo Fritz, who was keeping him company. He wept as he ate them, stroking each grape lovingly before putting it in his mouth, sucking out the sweet flesh and leaving the skin on his plate. Judo Fritz ate the grapes skin and all. "That's where all the goodness is," he told Peter. "Here, don't cry, mate. You'll get to see your wife tomorrow! But don't say anything about the wiring, will you?"

That night Kaul dreamed he was in bed with Susanne, making love. But when he looked again, it was not Susanne after all, but a huge bottle of schnapps. He yelled out loud, jumped out of bed in the dream—and awoke on the floor by his real bed, drenched with sweat and shivering from head to foot.

He crawled back under the quilt, drew it up to his chin and

clasped his hands. "Never again!" he prayed. "God, I'll never touch a drop again!"

And then he remembered that this was Friday.

Friday, pay day, Hubert Bollanz. Twenty percent of his pay, due every Friday.

His teeth were chattering; he jumped out of bed, flung the window wide and rested his forehead on the white bars. A man had died because of him, five children had been left fatherless. No one knew . . . except Bollanz, damn him . . . and this was the second Friday he'd get no money. He would never keep quiet, he'd talk, and ruin them all . . . Susanne, Petra, Heinz, Gundula . . .

Peter bit on the white bars, body and mind crying out for a drink. He retched, doubled up in agony. But no one came to help him. He must deal with his enemy alone.

Dr. Lingen sat down on the bench in the garden of the women's section again. Some extraordinarily powerful force drew him here, something he could no longer control. He had tried to do so, he had tried the only way he knew: he had drunk, with disastrous effects. Adding fuel to the flames is no way to put out a fire. Lingen felt as if he were standing outside his own body and looking at himself, making a diagnosis: the only cure for his disease would be a woman. This woman. Without this particular woman, his body would disintegrate. Then he had drunk again, he had sucked two chlorophyll tablets to sweeten his breath, he had gone to examine Peter, and now he was sitting here waiting. He did not know just what he was waiting for, but expectation was raging through his veins like a fever.

And suddenly he saw her.

He saw her long, golden hair, her slender body, her graceful legs, her swaying hips, her pointed breasts stretching the material of her white blouse taut. He leaped up, feeling the blood rise first to his head, then sink down to engorge his genitals. The sensation left him momentarily breathless. Then he rose and walked stiffly toward the girl. She retreated, step by step, as he approached; she was making for a shed where gardening tools were kept.

She slipped into the toolshed just ahead of him, and welcomed him in with open arms, hands clinging around his neck; she kissed him with the ferocity of a hungry beast of prey,

pressing him back against the rotting planks of the wall.

"I've been waiting for you . . ." she whispered, her sharp little teeth nibbling his lips and neck. The feel of it drove him wild; he grasped her breasts and squeezed them. She moaned like a wild animal in heat, a deep, disarmingly vulnerable sound. "I've been waiting for four days," she whispered. "I knew you'd come . . . I knew! I love you, I love you . . . people can tear each other apart for love, did you know that? Like cannibals . . . oh. . . ."

He felt material tearing under his hands, and then he felt flesh, warm, throbbing flesh, smooth skin, soft hair, a hard nipple, he felt muscles and sinews, breasts, waist, thighs, vulva, legs winding around him, a mouth that opened, whimpering and gasping, hands digging their nails into his back like the beaks of ten birds of prey . . . he was lying on an opened bale of peat, and the sea was raging around him, or was it a volcano, or a tempest howling? He could distinguish nothing anymore except pure sensation, he was animal and god, man and devil, he was melting away as he groaned hoarsely, dying in the heat of his own body, in a fire which would not go out, which sucked him into it, turned him to vapor, destroyed him utterly.

Eventually he staggered out of the toolshed, made his way along the wall, breathing heavily and taking great gulps of fresh air. He began to tremble. Then he found himself sitting on the bench again, drained and empty, his heart hammering and his body feeling as if it had been half crushed from the waist down. He buried his face in his hands, screaming inwardly at himself: You were like a wild animal! You tore at her like a wolf savaging a sheep! Or was *she* the wild animal? Was he the victim?

What did it matter? It had happened, but it left no sense of contentment or satisfaction behind, nothing but a quivering awareness of having transcended the bounds of the human ego.

He was still sitting there when the girl came back out of the shed. She was radiant, her long golden hair streaming in the wind like a victorious banner, her hips swaying, an enraptured smile on her lips. She stopped, glanced at Lingen, raised her hand in greeting—the casual greeting of an acquaintance met on the street, seen at a distance.

Dr. Lingen stared as she went along the path to the women's buildings; surrounded as she was with that aura of lust, she

walked with a light, lilting step, a tamed and cleaned-up little animal now. She swayed with a rhythm like the flickering of a snake's forked tongue . . . he was still staring when the ward nurse met her at the door, said something, looking her over and pointing to her torn blouse. The tamed little animal said something in reply, put back her head and laughed, indicating a thorn bush. The nurse seemed to accept her story, and took her indoors.

At last Lingen's mind cleared and he saw the truth. The full realization of it was shattering.

She is a patient here!

Either she's mad, or an alcoholic, or . . . or . . .

Lingen leaped to his feet and ran out of the garden, using the private gate again. The male nurse who answered his frantic ringing of the bell stared at him in amazement. But he ran on, slowing down as he reached the white building where Brosius had his rooms, and straightening his tie before he walked into the world of freedom outside the hospital.

As he did so, he glanced briefly upward. A face stared down at him from behind a barred first-floor window. Peter Kaul.

I envy you, thought Dr. Lingen, turning away. How I envy you at this moment!

Head held high, elegant as ever, he walked on through the main reception area to the way out. Two young doctors greeted him respectfully. They were both new here. "That was him," one told the other under his breath. "He's lecturing again tomorrow. On encephalitis. What d'you bet he gets the new University chair?"

Who could have guessed that Konrad Lingen's reputation lay buried in a tumbledown toolshed, behind a wall two yards high, on a crushed bale of peat?

Father Merckel was back from his conference. He had not finished his book of sermons, but he had found the strength to suppress his literary inspiration, subordinating it to his clerical duties, and to tear himself away from the schnapps bottle. "Yes, it was very tiring," he told inquirers. "I'm glad to be back."

But before he could really devote himself to his parochial duties again, among them the problems of Peter and his family, he had an unexpected visitor.

"Why, Dr. Lingen!" said the priest. After a night of deep sleep his powerful frame had almost recovered from the previous week's excesses. "This is a pleasant surprise. Sit down—can I offer you a drink?" The words flowed smoothly from his lips, as a normal act of courtesy.

Dr. Lingen shook his head. "No, thank you, Father." He was pale, his veneer of elegance crumbling as he sat there in the priest's leather chair. "I expect you *are* surprised to see me; you know I'm not a religious man."

"Well, I know doctors do tend to extremes! Some claim to see God when they have opened up a man's stomach, others go along with the great Virchow, who said he had cut thousands of bodies open and never yet found a soul! And I know that you incline towards Virchow's view, Lingen."

"I want to make a confession to you, Father," said Lingen, with some constraint. "Don't ask if I'm Evangelical or Catholic, I'm neither, though I was brought up Catholic as a child. But—" He hesitated. "But I feel a need to talk to a priest. I . . . I'm a swine. I've done some terrible things!"

Father Merckel showed no surprise, merely nodded as if agreeing. "We are all swine, doctor; none of us is the man he should be, we're all sinners. You can admit it, so can I. And perfection is an awe-inspiring notion. Indeed, a boring one. If we were all perfect I suspect we should be suicidal—literally bored to death!"

"Listen, Father! I—I'm an alcoholic," said Lingen baldly.

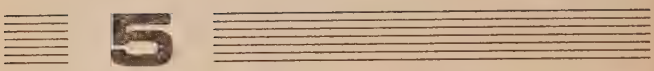
At that, Father Merckel swung around, as if he had been struck a sudden blow and was groping for support. "You . . . too?" he asked, bewildered.

Lingen flung his head back. "It's quite a short story, Father. It starts five years back, when I was beginning to specialize in brain surgery. I saw the slope I had to climb to reach the peak; the prospect might have made another man dizzy, but not me. It may sound conceited, but I knew my own abilities. I knew I could begin where other men left off. Well, at the time I felt I was not just reaching for the stars, I was touching them . . . I had a car accident. My car skidded, crashed into a milestone, was flung back into the road. I was unconscious for two days. There were no apparent aftereffects, I didn't even break anything . . . but when I tried to operate again after six weeks' convalescence, I found I had no feeling in my fingertips. Do you know what it means to be a surgeon—a brain

surgeon—and have no sensitivity in your fingers? A surgeon's touch is a gift from the gods. And I'd lost mine. During my two days' unconsciousness after the crash, something had short-circuited in my brain. I tried everything: medication, shock therapy, electrical treatment, radiation. In despair, I took morphine, not because I thought it might do any good, just to numb myself. And then, one day, I drank myself senseless. But before I actually passed out, a miracle happened . . . I could feel the coaster under my fingers, I could feel the slightest unevenness on the rim of my glass, I had my sense of touch back! I tested it out next day. Without alcohol, nothing! With alcohol, I could feel again! Pastor, it was a revelation, and I've been drinking ever since . . . before every major operation, whenever I need the sensitivity in my fingertips. It takes me three or four brandies now, and then . . ." he tapped his forehead, "then everything up here clicks into place. It all comes right, I'm free, I have courage to tackle anything—and as you know, I've made my name."

Father Merckel did not reply. He was thinking: he operates, I write and preach. He heals bodies, I heal souls—and neither of us can do it unless we drink and numb ourselves, betray ourselves. How well I understand . . .

As no reaction came from Father Merckel, Lingen went on. "I suppose catastrophes can lie dormant," he said huskily. "One's will is drowned in alcohol, dead, but all the time there's a catastrophe incubating, and when it suddenly comes upon one, the will to resist is gone. That's how it was . . . only a few days ago . . ." He had buried his face in his hands, and was speaking with difficulty. "I made love to a patient," he stammered. "No one else knows, pastor. One of the women in the State Mental Hospital . . . I couldn't help myself, I . . . I . . . oh God, I'm so afraid!" He dropped his hands from his face. "If anything should happen . . . suppose she becomes pregnant, it could start a train of disasters. I don't see what I could do unless . . . somehow, sometime, I'll have to kill her . . ."



Lingen's confession left him feeling exhausted and drained. He expected some comment, but Father Merckel remained silent. He stood by the sideboard, a tall, bear-like figure of a man with a massive head between broad shoulders, slowly sipping a glass of mineral water. His silence as he gazed at Dr. Lingen was like the silence of the grave.

Dr. Lingen rose abruptly from his chair. "For God's sake, say something, Father!" he cried.

"What do you expect me to say, doctor?" Father Merckel put down his glass. "You actually contemplate killing this girl! If you do it, you'll be found guilty of her murder, and that will be the end of your brilliant career . . ."

"I shall kill myself before that day comes!"

"Hardly. The likes of you and me lack the courage for that kind of step." Father Merckel passed both hands through his white hair. So many people in such haste to reach the afterlife, he thought. What do they expect to achieve by suicide? Life is sweet, even if you're in the gutter. "You were under the influence of alcohol when this incident with the girl happened?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. I'm always under the influence of alcohol."

"What exactly do you mean by always?"

"I need alcohol now in order to work. I need two brandies first thing in the morning, when I get up. Two is enough; that does the trick."

"Who knows about this?"

"No one."

"Not even your wife?"

"She has no idea. If anyone told her she would never believe

it." Dr. Lingen clung to the edge of the table for support. "I shouldn't be groveling like this if I had a drink inside me now..."

"Then you'd better have one." Father Merckel poured a large cognac and handed it to Lingen, who took it greedily and drank it without putting the glass down.

The change in him was quite dramatic and very sudden. Lingen's body straightened, life came into the empty eyes, they were shining again with that energy that so fascinated his acquaintances. Father Merckel, holding his breath as he watched this transformation, simultaneously realized that the man now facing him was incapable of confessing or repenting for anything. A switch had been thrown in his mind; cold intellect was in charge again, and had shut off the soul laid bare just a moment before.

Lingen put the glass down on the table. His hand was not trembling now; he radiated dignity. Father Merckel found the charismatic force of his brilliant personality oppressive.

"You had better forget what I said just now!" Lingen straightened his tie and smoothed the lapels of his jacket. "I was talking nonsense. I'm sure everything will work out. One just has to grasp the nettle firmly, that's the secret of life. Obstacles in the path are there to be stepped over, not to bring one down..."

"Yes, and suppose this girl actually does have a child?"

Dr. Lingen reached for his hat, smiling the charming, confident smile of a man of the world.

"I shall deny it's mine, Father."

"But suppose she can prove it?"

"Prove it? How could she?" Lingen went to the door and opened it. "She's a patient in a ward full of delirious women. Whatever she alleges took place can be diagnosed as a hallucination."

"A baby is real enough, doctor!" cried Father Merckel, considerably shocked.

"Yes, indeed. But there are nine months between conception and birth. That's a long time—perhaps *too* long a time for a brain irreparably damaged by alcohol."

Father Merckel waited until he heard the front door of the rectory close. Then he picked up the bottle of cognac in hands that trembled, raised it to his own mouth and drank deeply.

"He was quite right, he *is* a swine!" he said, putting the bottle down again. "God in Heaven—surely You know I am not as bad as that yet!"

There was no work on Fritz's bungalow today. Peter stayed in his room, to be examined by Professor Brosius himself. Dr. Lingen's psychiatric report had been accurate and good. Professor Brosius was always rather irritated when the courts sent Lingen to *his* hospital, to examine patients whom he, Brosius, was likely to understand better than any outsider, however expert, who spent a comparatively brief time with the mentally ill. But there it was: Lingen was considered the top expert, Professor Brosius merely ran this hospital! Cautious attempts to get himself designated the courts' official psychiatric expert had failed, despite the fact that he and the presiding judge of the Higher Regional Court had been boys together, despite the fact that he went riding with the Prosecutor General. For there was a small black mark on Brosius's otherwise spotless reputation: nothing to do with his professional qualifications and ability, but Brosius had been in the Storm Troops cavalry during the war, and there could be no denying, concealing or making light of that fact. He went fox-hunting in a red coat nowadays, but in 1938 he had ridden through the woods in a brown shirt, and though everyone knew that his only motive was his passion for the life of a cavalry officer, an expert witness regularly called upon by the courts must be whiter than white. And Dr. Lingen, in this respect, was. He had left school in 1937 without ever having been a member of the Hitler Youth. For this he had to thank his father, a GP who happened to have a lady with syphilis on his list. She had actually come to see him about her bronchitis, but Dr. Theodor Lingen soon discovered that the trouble lay much deeper. Two days later, the Deputy Gauleiter visited the doctor. All medical records of the transaction were destroyed, and a hearty handshake sealed the two men's pledge of secrecy. But Konrad Lingen had never had to wear the brown uniform of the Hitler Youth, nor, later, that of the Nazi Students' League.

Professor Brosius suffered from a sense of injustice. Why should he be at a disadvantage now, just because he had never come across a syphilitic Deputy Gauleiter? And he always checked Dr. Lingen's reports very carefully himself, drawing up a second report of his own, which no one read and which lay gathering dust in the files.

Peter was apprehensive when Brosius came into the room, apparently quite friendly, and offered him a cigarette. "If you act too clever he'll reckon you're schizophrenic," Judo Fritz had warned him. "Got a lot of imagination, schizos have. If you act too dumb he'll reckon the drink's addled your wits for good, so watch your step!"

"But what should I say, then?" asked Kaul in alarm. "I just want to get out of here, start a new life, and never drink again!"

"Yes, that's what they all say." Judo Fritz wagged a cautionary forefinger. "Better keep off that tack, laddie!"

But an hour's conversation with Pastor Merckel's protégé convinced Brosius that he was not dangerous, and indeed was perfectly pleasant company. Unfortunately, Lingen had said just the same in his report, giving it as his opinion that Kaul was a danger to society only under the influence of alcohol.

"Well," said Brosius, in friendly tones, "with your cooperation, Mr. Kaul, I can see you becoming a hard-working, well-balanced and useful citizen again in the foreseeable future!" Then, sharply, he added, "Do you feel thirsty?"

"Yes."

"All the time?"

"Most of the time."

"Burning pains in the stomach?"

"Yes; they're very bad sometimes."

"And when you dream, what are your dreams like?"

"I . . . well, I have erotic dreams, Professor."

"Ah!"

"Isn't that natural? I've been away from my wife four weeks now. I'm . . . I'm not used to . . ." He stopped, embarrassed, wondering if they had to go into all this? Susanne and I had a good marriage that way, he thought, even if I did drink every Friday, and we had debts, and we were afraid of what the next day might bring.

"What aren't you used to?" Brosius pressed him.

Kaul swallowed. "Well, four weeks, Professor! I'm—I mean, I'm a normal man!"

"These dreams of yours are very vivid?"

"Yes, Professor."

"How do you feel afterward?"

"Exhausted."

"Thank you, Mr. Kaul. Good morning, then!"

Back in his own room, Professor Brosius was pleased to be able to add a footnote of his own to Dr. Lingen's report.

He wrote: "Mental state of libido sexualis induced by patient's abuse of alcohol. Hormones might be given to inhibit this tendency during withdrawal treatment."

That afternoon Professor Brosius gave permission for Susanne to visit her husband. "But keep an eye on them," he told Judo Fritz. "Take him away at the slightest sign of trouble."

It was a common problem on visiting days. All too often, Brosius had known men to take down their trousers at the mere sight of their wives. Then they had to be forcibly dragged from the visiting room by the male nurses, who put them under a cold shower until they calmed down. Once, just once, there had been a fatality; a man had managed to castrate himself in his state of frenzy, and had bled to death before he could be stitched up in the operating theater.

Judo Fritz passed the good news on to Peter. "Susanne . . . coming to see me!" he said softly. "With the children?"

"I guess so."

Kaul stroked his chin, his fingers scraping over the stubble. "How do I look?" he asked pathetically. "I know it's not my day for a shave—but could you give me one?"

Judo Fritz laughed. "Here, you sit down! We'll give you a face as smooth as a baby's bottom!" He tied a towel around Kaul's neck. "Got a pretty wife, have you?"

"Yes."

"Look, you're an electrician, you'd know how to get things cheap, right! Boilers and lighting fixtures and that . . ."

"Yes, of course."

"Could your wife get that sort of stuff, using your name?"

"Yes." Kaul turned to look at Judo Fritz. "Yes, I see. If I ask Susanne to get what you need for the bungalow, she'll do it."

"That's the idea!" Judo Fritz laid his gigantic hand on Kaul's shoulder. "It's a deal! When your wife comes I'll leave you alone with her. Fifteen minutes . . . can you make it inside fifteen minutes?" Judo Fritz grinned and dug Kaul in the ribs. "I'll take the kiddies off too, show 'em picture books . . . I'm a friend of yours, right?"

Peter did not reply. He felt he could have screamed. Letting me have Susanne, as if she were some cheap little tart. Fifteen minutes; can you make it inside fifteen minutes?

Suddenly he bent his head and wept.

"Now, now!" said Fritz, paternally. "Don't upset yourself!

Only four hours to wait, you can last that long!"

He ran hot water into the basin, whistling the tune of a bawdy song. Peter pressed his hands to his ears.

This was a very special day: better than Easter or Christmas or a birthday. Susanne had been sitting at her sewing machine for the last four nights, making new clothes for the children. A red dress with a white piqué collar and cuffs for Petra, who looked like a little doll in it, her fair hair like honey flowing over the red material. Heinz had his first pair of long trousers, and his mother made him a stylish sailor jacket from a pattern given away in a magazine. Even Gundula had a new dress, pink with an embroidered border of flowers.

When it came to herself, Susanne had no money to spare for material for a new dress, so she altered her old flowered Sunday dress, making it into a close-fitting sheath dress—so close-fitting that when she stood in front of the bedroom mirror and turned around she wondered whether it was quite decent. Her breasts pressed against the material, which fitted tightly over her hips and thighs, showing the curve of her buttocks and leading the eye down to her slim legs. What will Peter say? she wondered. I hope he'll be glad I haven't given up! There's nothing wrong in showing him I can still look good. We've had three children, we know each other's bodies well enough, but I want to look different—like something he wants and can have if he gets cured. I know Peter, he can't do without love.

At three in the afternoon they were standing in the reception area of the State Mental Hospital, while the porter phoned through to announce their arrival. Soon Judo Fritz appeared. He whistled at the sight of Susanne in her tight dress, and took a good look at her from the top of the stairs. "Mrs. Kaul?" he asked, unnecessarily.

Susanne turned. "Yes." She put her arms around Petra and Heinz. Gundula was lying in her pram, sucking her beloved wooden blocks.

"Your husband's waiting," said Judo Fritz. He picked up the pram in his huge hands, raised it to his apelike chest and carried it upstairs. "He's on the first floor—follow me."

Gundula was crowing happily, but Heinz pulled Susanne's sleeve, whispering, "Mummy, that's the man who dragged Daddy off when we came here before!"

"Hush!" Susanne shook her head at him. They entered a white corridor with a glass door between it and the staircase; the words PRIVATE WING: NO ENTRY were engraved on the glass. Peter was standing by his window. Heinz was the first to enter the room; he stopped, staring at his father.

"Hello, Daddy," he said softly.

"Why . . . why, how you've grown, Heinz!" stammered Kaul. His throat felt dry. Petra came in next, and then Susanne. "Peter, darling!" said Susanne stretching out her arms.

Peter stared at his wife. She had put her hair in rollers overnight (there was no money for a visit to the hairdresser's), and now blonde curls framed her thin face, which she had made up to look as fresh as she could, with a little powder and blusher. "How . . . how pretty you look!" said Peter, with constraint. He came toward her, but then stopped to look at her again. "You've gotten thinner, but it suits you, Susi!"

Judo Fritz thought this was the moment to leave. He nodded to Kaul. "I'll just show the kiddies some of the photos I took on vacation in the Black Forest," he said. "Fifteen minutes, remember. Okay?" He looked at Susanne's back, her hips and legs, and licked his lips. "I'll knock three times."

Petra and Heinz followed him without protest: to them, a hospital was a place where you had to talk in whispers, and do whatever the men and women in white coats said.

Sweat broke out on Kaul's forehead. Susanne opened her handbag, found a handkerchief and mopped his face. "What did he mean about fifteen minutes, Peter?" she asked. Kaul swallowed, breathing hard.

"Oh, nothing." Then he embraced his wife, very carefully, as if she were made of fragile glass, kissed her, and laid his head on her shoulder. He did not dare touch her breasts, though he could feel their pressure against him, and the pattern of the lace edging on her bra. It's a white bra, he thought, the one with the silly little yellow nylon rose in between its cups, and three hooks at the back. I've done them up and undone them for her so often!

"Why is he going to knock three times?" Susanne asked again.

Kaul groaned quietly. "Never mind, Susi . . . he's a swine, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"He went out so we could . . . we could . . ." He tore himself

from her embrace. She looked at the uncovered bed, and suddenly understood. She went stiffly over to it, stood in front of him and put both hands on his chest. He's my husband, she thought, and I love him in spite of everything. He has a right to my body.

"Is . . . is that what you wanted?" she asked softly.

Peter shook his head. He had flung the window open and was resting his forehead on the iron bars. Down below, Dr. Lingen was standing by the gate in the wall barring off the women's section, talking to a guard and one of the nurses from the women's wards.

"No, Susi, no! I couldn't bear to live with myself afterward!"

"But I love you . . ."

"Yes, I know! Don't let's talk about it—come away from that bed. Say something else, anything, never mind if it's silly, just say something!"

Susanne crossed the room and sat down at the white-painted wooden table by the wall. She folded her arms and bit her lower lip, her body shaking with suppressed sobs. "Meyer's on the corner have pineapple for seventy-nine cents a large can, it's their special offer . . ."

"That's nice," stammered Kaul, clutching the bars of the window.

"Oh, and I've got extra time to pay off the installments on the television; they said that would be all right, because of you being here."

"Comes in useful, doesn't it?" said Kaul bitterly.

"And Mrs. Wullmann has had her sixth," said Susanne, hoarsely. "It's a girl."

Peter nodded. The longer Susanne was there in the room, the worse he felt. They stood looking at each other, knowing they belonged together, but with a vacuum between them they could only try to fill with small talk. At last there were three loud knocks on the door, then a pause, and then Judo Fritz came in. Alone. He glanced first at the bed, then at Peter and Susanne. They were still apart, he by the window, she sitting at the table, some three yards of space between them. It might just as well have been thirty yards—or three hundred miles.

"Time's up," said Fritz. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Peter, in hollow tones.

Judo Fritz glanced at Susanne, who was crying silently,

handkerchief pressed to her mouth. Stupid sonofabitch, he thought, letting a pretty thing like her down! That's alcoholics for you—can't get it up when it comes to the point.

But Heinz and Petra came back into the room before Judo Fritz could ask any more embarrassing questions. Peter hugged and kissed his children, got them to tell him about school, their marks, the camp where Heinz would be going next summer, their teachers and friends. The small gray world of the housing complex rose vividly before him. That was how it had been—how it would be again when they let him out of here.

Susanne saw Judo Fritz glance at her and make a sign. She nodded through her tears.

"It's time for us to go, Peter," she said unhappily.

"Already? You . . . you'll come again?" he asked, caressing the children's heads.

"Thursday next week," said Fritz.

"Good."

"Are you glad?" asked Susanne, in a low voice.

"You know I am, Susi."

But she's so far away, he thought. I have to shout if she's to hear me!

He went out into the corridor, saw Gundula's pram, and bent over her. Her beautiful big eyes beamed at him, and she held out one of her well-chewed wooden blocks, crowing happily.

"She's going to have another examination," Susanne said.

Kaul looked up. "What for?"

"There are new drugs or something, to strengthen the nerves, stimulate the cells . . . I don't understand much about it."

"Who says so?"

"Dr. Lingen."

"Oh, him." Kaul nodded. "He's clever. It would be wonderful if . . ."

"It *would* be wonderful, wouldn't it?"

Then they left. Peter stood at the doorway of his room, waving goodbye. When they had gone downstairs he ran back to his window and stared out through the bars. "Oh, come back!" he breathed. "Come back, Susi . . . you're all I have in the world!"

He jumped as the door opened and closed again. There was Judo Fritz, looking at the untouched bed. "You great sap!" he said scornfully.

Kaul shook his head. "I—I love her too much for that," he said quietly.

Next day Professor Brosius had a brief conference with his two senior consultants, as a preliminary to what he described as "a rather amusing experiment." He continued his explanation: "We are due to have a visit today from three former alcoholics. Members of a society originating in America, where it has over two hundred thousand members—all, so they claim, reformed alcoholics. Alcoholics Anonymous: you may have heard of them. I must admit that, as a sober down-to-earth scientist, I feel a certain scepticism, and I think a justifiable one, about the aims and methods of these people. They claim to achieve results by simply talking—by setting themselves up as examples—where we have failed with all the medical means at our disposal." Professor Brosius cleared his throat. "However, after some thought I agreed to let three members of the organization come and lecture here. As all they do is talk, they can hardly harm our patients!" Brosius allowed himself a small anticipatory smile. "We shall see how they get on in Wing 3!" He scrutinized some printed matter on the table before him. "Here's the broad outline: Alcoholics Anonymous, AA for short, has its headquarters in New York at 468 Park Avenue South, and was founded in 1935 by a Mr. Bill W. and Dr. Bob Smith. The society has over two hundred thousand members, there are members in every country in the world—and now it seems it's Germany's turn." A note of sarcasm in the professor's voice betrayed his opinion of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The two doctors smiled, to keep on the right side of the Professor, but there was interest in their eyes. Two hundred thousand alcoholics, cured by the mere power of persuasion? What sort of comparative results could conventional medicine offer? The doctors were used to seeing alcoholics discharged from drying-out institutions after four, six or nine months, sometimes not for a year, cautiously described as "improved" in condition, rather than "cured." And experience showed how likely they were to be back at intervals—perhaps two or three more times, and later as permanent inmates, when their brain cells were destroyed. Only the merest handful of genuine alcoholics found their way back to normal life.

"Well, we shall see what we shall see!" said Brosius, ironically. "I've picked Ward 70 for the experiment—and if one

of *them* goes over to soft drinks, you may consider me a convert to AA and its methods!"

Half an hour later three men, well dressed but in no way out of the ordinary, entered Ward 70. Judo Fritz had gotten the place thoroughly smartened up: the floor was scrubbed, the table clean, the eleven patients were drinking coffee in colored plastic mugs instead of the usual tin ones. The beds were made, the blankets folded, the room had been well aired, and Judo Fritz had threatened, "Anyone who stinks the place out in the next hour or so is for the dark cell, get it?" He gave the homosexual from Berlin a clip over the ear for smearing two gobbets of snot on the clean table, warned the patients yet again to behave, and the eleven of them were sitting docile as schoolboys in detention when the three men came in.

"God be with you, friends!"

That's a great start, thought Judo Fritz. God doesn't cut any ice with this lot!

The three men were followed by Professor Brosius and the two doctors. The patients jumped up and stood to attention, chanting in chorus, "Good morning, Professor!"

Brosius nodded and gestured. "Sit down, please."

There was much scraping of chairs and muttering. The eleven alcoholics looked curiously at the table in front of theirs. The three men, who had sat down there, rose again one by one like toys bobbing on springs, to introduce themselves in terms which surprised their audience.

"My name is Ewald B., and I am an alcoholic."

"My name is Ludwig M., and I am an alcoholic."

"My name is Hans S., and I am an alcoholic."

Dr. Fassbender, the thin little lawyer with eyes like an angora rabbit who had offered Peter his services, blew his nose.

Brosius glanced at the doctors. What did I tell you? he was asking mutely. They're just making fools of themselves. They've got an audience of hard cases here who'd sell their own mothers for a bottle of schnapps.

One of the men, the one who had called himself Hans S., remained on his feet. He undid his shirt, pulled up his undershirt and pointed to a large red scar on his stomach. "You see this scar?" he asked, his voice quite matter-of-fact. "I got it in a knife fight in Munich. I was drunk, and so was the man who stuck the knife into me. We were quarreling over a girl; she

was drunk too. I was a notorious alcoholic in the city. I needed four bottles of wine a day just to keep me going. I'd started drinking as a student, when I was only twenty. I was studying philosophy, literary history, German, art history. I passed my exams—but I drank the whole time. I was scared I wouldn't pass; everyone told me I wasn't very bright, it was just luck if I got through college. And I believed them, so I drank, because when I drunk I felt strong, I was not a fool, I could cope! So I went on down. I soon lost my job because of drinking, I got kicked out of any lodgings I took, I slept in Salvation Army hostels, or hostels for the homeless, or in sheds or barns outside the city. I never washed, I stank like a goat, I was thin as a rail, but somehow I always found the money to buy booze, and then I was happy."

"Good for you!" cried the man from Berlin.

"One day I collapsed in the middle of the street. Passersby took me into a draper's shop, and they picked me up there—I don't mean the police or an ambulance or any kind of official, sweeping up human rubbish; there was a man who came into the back of the shop, very well-dressed, and looked at me—'My name is Hubert N., and I am an alcoholic,' he said. He had me taken out to his car and he drove me home with him. He had a villa in Bogenhausen, and I stayed in bed there for a week, shrieking for schnapps and being given orange juice. I spat it out, but my friend only laughed and told me he'd been just the same once, and what had cured him was realizing there was still room in the world for him to make good. Now that made me think. After a week I didn't want schnapps anymore, I was eating again, I got some new clothes and my friend took me and introduced me to some other people. Then I had a piece of luck: I got a job in some newspaper offices. First as a kind of errand boy, then in the filing room, later as a sub-editor. I found a pleasant room to live in, I got to know a girl in the accounts department at the office, we were happy . . . and I kept telling myself: you will lose all this if you start drinking again. Even one drink, and you'll be back in the gutter. The mere thought of it gave me the horrors. I'd learned to enjoy life, I had a job, I had a girl, I was getting on in the world—no one told me I was a fool now! I realized I was intelligent enough to build a good career. Today I'm a publisher myself, I employ sixty people, I have a wife I love and four children . . . and all because I have never touched a drop of alcohol again."

There was silence in Ward 70 when Mr. Hans S. stopped speaking, except for Dr. Fassbender sobbing quietly. The man from Berlin was chewing his bottom lip, another man, known as Horseface because of the way he bared his teeth when meals came around, had his head in his hands.

Professor Brosius was transfixed with amazement. Who'd have believed it, he thought. Better than any amount of sedatives! An injection straight into the heart.

Ludwig M. was the next to rise. He too began, "I am an alcoholic," and told his own story in matter-of-fact tones: from squatting in a disused bunker to bank manager. Mr. Ewald B.'s story was along the same lines: the tale of his progress from the gutter to success as the architect of a number of well-known modern churches.

The three men did not seem to expect questions or comments. When the last of them had finished speaking, they stood up, said goodbye to the eleven alcoholics who were sitting perfectly still around the table, and left the room.

But as they were leaving, something unexpected did happen. Dr. Fassbender and Horseface jumped to their feet and ran in pursuit of the three men.

"Don't go yet!" cried Dr. Fassbender pitifully. "I'm an academic! I'm a lawyer! Help me, please help me! I'll do anything! There's never been anyone here who really wanted to help me. They only shut me up and preached at me, gave me injections and pills and tablets and advised me to be sterilized. But you know another way out, I can see you do! Please help me."

Horseface stood beside him, nodding agreement. His large teeth were showing. "I was a house painter," he said. "I could work again, if only someone would give me a chance . . ."

That evening, Dr. Fassbender and Horseface had gone from Wing 3 of the hospital. After a good deal of discussion Professor Brosius had allowed them to leave with the men from Alcoholics Anonymous, though the latter had to sign an agreement that they would be responsible for the two patients.

"And what did you think of that, then?" Professor Brosius asked his two senior consultants when Dr. Fassbender and Horseface had been driven away. The doctors hesitated; a direct question like that was hardly fair, when you might damage your medical career by giving the wrong answer. However, Professor Brosius gave them a lead, carried away by his own

newfound enthusiasm. "Truly remarkable! It puts us conventional psychiatrists to shame! You know what I'm going to do? I shall get these Alcoholics Anonymous people to come and give us a lecture every month. We must keep up with the times, you know."

Old Brosius, keeping up with the times! That really called for a drink, thought his two colleagues.

Dr. Lingen met Karin von Putthausen again on the garden seat in the women's section. She seemed to have been waiting for him, for she waved as he came through the gate in the wall. Her beautiful face was radiant, and she had pinned up her long blonde hair. She seems more womanly, somehow, thought Dr. Lingen. Seductive, and dangerous. He sat down beside her, looking at her thoughtfully.

"You haven't been here for four weeks," she said, but still smiling, glowing from within.

"I've been on a lecture tour," Lingen lied.

"Well, never mind. I've got wonderful news for you . . . I'm going to have a baby! Your baby darling! My own angel's baby!" She gave a clear, ringing laugh. Dr. Lingen glanced around. The matron was standing outside the main building, talking to a woman doctor.

"Who knows?" he asked.

"Nobody! It's none of their business. But when we're married . . ."

"I'm married already. You know that."

"You can get a divorce! You don't think I'm giving up my chance of heaven, do you?" She laid her delicate head on his shoulder. "I know exactly what we shall do! You'll get me out of here, and take me away with you, and we'll be married, our child will be born—ah, and when we really want to be happy we shall drink! You don't know what I can be like in bed with a couple of drinks inside me . . ."

Dr. Lingen nodded, only half listening. So it's happened, he thought. There's no going back now; I can't pretend everything will solve itself. I must deal with the situation, and I must make it all look natural.

"Yes, darling, I will, I'll take you away very soon," he said, standing up. "But on one condition: not a word to anyone else!"

"I promise!"

"I'll get you transferred to my clinic, so don't be surprised

if an ambulance comes for you."

"Do you really have a clinic of your own, darling?"

"Yes."

"And shall we be alone there?" Her lovely head was swaying to and fro, and there was a hectic gleam in her big blue eyes. "Oh, what will you do to me there . . . ?"

"We'll be happy."

"Perfectly, blissfully happy?"

"Yes—you'll forget all about the outside world."

Dr. Lingen turned and went over to the matron and doctor; seeing him coming, they waved, and the doctor, in obvious agitation, hurried to meet him.

"Have you heard, Dr. Lingen?" she cried. "That von Putthausen girl is pregnant! It'll be a scandal . . ."

Lingen's heart stood still. This is the end, he thought. It's all over.

"I can't believe it," he heard himself say, thickly. "You mean, it happened here?"

"Yes. The professor doesn't know yet. It's knocked us all sideways . . ."

"And—and who's the father?"

"We don't know," said the doctor grimly. "She won't say. But I'll find out, don't you worry! I'll get her to talk, even if I have to use a truth drug. I know it's unorthodox, but we *must* get to the bottom of this shocking affair."

Lingen nodded weakly.

So it was a race against time. No scruples now—that would be fatal. He must act, and fast.

6

Professor Brosius was reading a psychiatric journal when his personal assistant, Miss Bankel, knocked at his door, looked in and said, "Dr. Lingen would like a word with you, Professor. He says it's urgent. Will you see him?"

"Yes, of course, Miss Bankel." Brosius glanced at the baroque gold clock on his desk. "But don't forget I have a conference in half an hour's time..."

"Quite, Professor."

Brosius hardly had time to wonder what Lingen wanted. It must be some professional matter; there was little social contact between the two men. When Lingen walked into the room he rose and stretched out a welcoming hand. "Nice to see you, Lingen," he said. "Have a cognac, my dear fellow?"

"What—in a hospital where you dry out alcoholics?" laughed Lingen. His eyes had their usual gleam; he felt fresh and strong. Before setting out to visit Brosius he had shut himself in the lavatory, drunk half the contents of his hip flask, and then taken two chlorophyll tablets to mask the smell of alcohol on his breath.

Brosius smiled back. "Working with alcoholics, as we do in Wing 3 here, means we can appreciate a drink all the better; we recognize our limits. You do care for cognac, Lingen?"

"By all means, Professor."

They drank a couple of glasses of cognac, smoked cigars, and discussed the appalling weather of the last few days before they came to the point. It was Brosius, barely able to suppress his curiosity, who broached the subject.

"Is anything wrong, Lingen?"

"Wrong? No." Lingen looked into his brandy glass. God, I needed those two drinks, he thought. I feel a lot better now. It's amazing what a drink can do for you—and what a curse it can be. "It's about the von Putthausen girl."

"Von Putthausen?" Brosius reran a quick mental check over the most recent list of his patients on whom the courts had wanted Lingen's report. Von Putthausen? She hadn't been among them, he was sure of that; it was not the kind of name you'd forget in a hurry.

"Karin von Putthausen. I believe she has been a patient in Ward 5 of the women's section for about three months."

"Oh, yes!" Brosius remembered now. That blonde girl with the face of a Madonna. Going downhill fast, a hopeless dipsomaniac. It had begun with her first boyfriend, on vacation by the North Sea, had gone on with an Italian boy in Rimini during her school summer vacation, and she had collapsed just before her final examinations. Nervous shock, they said. Twenty-seven empty spirits bottles had been found in her wardrobe. She was said to be an intelligent girl, should have passed her examinations easily—but then there were her affairs, all the leisure times she had as the daughter of a rich industrialist, the liquor, the parties, and later on the fear of failing her exams: one had to drink to forget, and to give oneself courage.

"Yes, a tragic case," said Brosius. "Typical of alcoholism in the affluent society, too." He looked inquiringly at Dr. Lingen. "What about her?"

"Her family has asked me to take her as a patient in my clinic."

"I see." Brosius was bristling. Transferred from his care to Lingen's clinic! Was Lingen supposed to be more competent than himself? Such a question hardly arose with a patient on social security, but a private patient was a different matter. "May I ask the reason? We have been doing everything humanly possible for her . . ."

"Well, it's my view that Miss von Putthausen's addiction to alcohol is the result of a trauma. I believe we may be dealing with traumatic weakness of the brain function as defined by Reichardt, which, as of course you know, can lead to alcohol abuse."

Professor Brosius stiffened. That "as of course you know" was an insult. Naturally he knew! He hardly needed a dissertation on traumatic disorders from a trumped-up young lecturer! Lingen was arrogant, and must be shown his place. Even if

he happens to be right, thought Brosius, I must contradict him on principle!

"I am afraid my opinion of the patient's disorder differs from yours. I consider she suffers from psychological disturbances, Freudian complexes which have induced alcoholism. To put it bluntly, she's the victim of her boredom with life and her longing for exciting experiences."

"Well, anyway, her family has asked to have her transferred to my clinic—and I must say I should like to study her case, from the surgical aspect."

"Just as you please." Brosius had risen, his cordiality frozen in the icy atmosphere of professional competition. "If I receive written authority, that is. Miss von Putthausen came here voluntarily, and with her family's consent she can discharge herself. I don't force patients to stay in my care." He spoke sharply. Lingen too rose to his feet.

"Then I'll send an ambulance for her in three hours' time, and you'll have her family's consent by then, Professor."

They bowed briefly to each other, Miss Bankel, evidently gifted with a sixth sense, opened the door, Dr. Lingen nodded to her with the ready charm that never failed with women, the door closed behind him and Professor Brosius was left alone, muttering something about "impertinence" under his breath. He poured himself another cognac, and drank it slowly, trying to savor it. But somehow he could not enjoy it.

Three hours later the ambulance from the Lingen Clinic drove up. As yet, no word had come from Karin's family, but Brosius dismissed this minor point when Miss Bankel pointed it out.

"Oh, let them have the girl!" he said. "I don't intend to make a fuss. It's Lingen's responsibility."

"But, Professor, we're supposed to..." Miss Bankel indicated the patient's file. Brosius slammed his hand down on his desk.

"I'm a doctor, not a bureaucrat! I dare say the family will send me their authorization—meanwhile, do you want me to send the ambulance away again? Don't worry, Miss Bankel, your records will be complete!"

There was palpable relief in the women's section of the hospital. The woman doctor in charge of the alcoholics' ward and the matron carried Karin's cases to the ambulance themselves and shook her hand. Thank God for Dr. Lingen, they were thinking, a friend in need if ever there was one! No need

to tell the professor now, no embarrassing investigations, no scandal, no danger of a public inquiry into the pregnancy of Karin von Putthausen, a patient in strict isolation in the State Mental Hospital; it was not their worry anymore. They could hush the whole thing up and breathe freely again!

The doctor and matron waved to Karin, their faces bright with relief.

Brosius stood by his window, watching Lingen's ambulance leave. He was not quite sure he had acted correctly. Traumatic disorders, he thought. No one ever mentioned an accident the patient had had, nothing of that sort, and her anamnesis had been very thorough, he had conducted it himself. He had diagnosed the cause of her alcoholism as environmental influences. An accident . . . ?

"I'd like another look at Miss von Putthausen's case history," he told Miss Bankel over the intercom.

"But we let them take her notes with her, Professor," said the secretary.

"Oh—well, thank you." Brosius shrugged his shoulders.

But his sense of uneasiness persisted, though he could not quite say why. It was not just his instinctive dislike of Lingen, the child of fortune. All this hurry to get her transferred, thought Brosius. I should really call her family for confirmation. I suppose it could be considered disloyalty to a colleague, but personally I'd call it simple caution.

Hesitantly, he put out his hand to the telephone.

Karin was given a private room, and a young nurse to look after her (like all the nurses at the Lingen Clinic, this girl was in love with the boss; the place never had trouble with staff shortages). Karin was given a sedative injection to help her sleep and recover from the stress of the transfer from the hospital.

That evening Dr. Lingen stood alone by Karin's bed, looking thoughtfully at the sleeping girl. I shall have to kill her, he thought, there's no other way out. An abortion would only be a half-measure. She'd talk, she'd tell people what happened in the hospital garden, just as she told everyone in the women's section she was pregnant. As long as she's alive she'll be a danger to me—my whole brilliant career would be shattered if this girl told her story.

He picked up the glass by her bedside, went to the washbasin, filled it, came back and took a small brown bottle from

the pocket of his white coat. He shook a few drops of clear liquid into the water, stirred the contents of the glass with a small glass rod, and then put the glass back on the bedside table. He left the room, closing the door soundlessly after him.

His plan was typical of the man: simple and brilliant. In half an hour's time the nurse on night duty would come around, taking temperatures and giving the patients a couple of sleeping tablets to help them rest; they would swallow these tablets with the water in their glasses. But Karin's glass now held a few drops of water contaminated with radioactivity, mingled with ordinary tap water. While experimenting with radioactive rays in his laboratory, with the aim of finding a means to destroy certain kinds of brain tumors by radiation, Lingen had bottled a small quantity of this highly radioactive liquid. Taken orally, it would create radioactivity in the body which would slowly but surely contaminate the blood, causing leukemia. A certain death, and a perfectly legitimate one. The perfect murder. Who would think of testing the girl's corpse with a geiger counter?

But Karin was not, in fact, asleep when Dr. Lingen stood in her room, pouring death out of a small brown bottle. She was awake, watching him from under her lashes. She had not meant to spy on him, but to surprise him with a sudden embrace, a kiss, and the offer of her superb body when he bent over her to look into her face. But he did not bend over her: he only dropped some liquid into her water glass and then slipped out of the room.

And suddenly Karin realized what was happening to her. It was such a terrible revelation that she sat bolt upright in bed, both hands pressed to her mouth.

He's killing me, was all she could think. Over and over again: he's killing me, he loved me and now he's killing me . . . he loved me and he's killing me, he loved me . . .

There had once been a time when she wanted to die. That was in Rimini. Franco was the boy's name, Franco Tellucci. Curly black hair, a hooked nose, curly hair on his chest, muscular arms, a gold medallion between his nipples which he never took off; even lying on top of her he just slung it around to his back, that magnificent back where the muscles stood out like cords as he made love, his smooth brown skin breaking out into hot, acrid sweat. They had had two weeks of sun and sand, lying among the rocks, on the bottom of a rowing boat, in the pine wood, down in the cellar of the Ristorante Dante, where Franco ran errands. Two weeks of a hot desert wind

blowing over her body—until the day he simply said, "*Arrivederci, bionda* . . . I lova Babette now, she giva five thousand lire for make love . . ."

Her heart had broken. And she drank to drown the pain: strong wine from Ancona and Sicily, aperitifs, spirits. She was drunk for a week, morning, evening, the whole time, with brief pauses in between when she vomited, her stomach seeming to heave itself up into her throat. Then she drank again, to forget, to numb herself, to rid herself of the lust throbbing in her loins, which had learned to open like floodgates under the touch of fingers stroking her tenderly. One day, quite suddenly, as she was lying on a clifftop by the sea, with the sound of the breakers below, she thought: why not end it all? Death . . . no more drinking and vomiting, no more of the torments of unsatisfied desire, no more yearning for warmth and love. Down into the depths and it would all be over, she would be at peace.

God help me, she thought. I want to fly, to fly away . . .

She woke up in a hospital in Rimini, battered and bruised, but alive, with no serious injuries. And with a raging, burning thirst that tore her guts apart. She bribed a nurse to bring in wine, and sweet, sticky liqueurs; she drank and drank, and after a week they threw her out of the hospital for dancing naked in the corridors.

That had been in the summer holidays, a year ago. *La dolce vita*, a Latin lover—enjoy your holiday! But it was over now, only a memory, an episode that had paled into insignificance now she had a child growing in her body. Konrad Lingen's child. And its father came creeping into her room to pour poison in her glass. Death was not her own choice this time . . . she was to be killed, murdered by the hand she had kissed, the hand that had felt her so intimately, leaving marks on her which lasted some days, and excited and aroused her when she looked at them in the mirror.

He wants to kill me . . .

The thought drove her to action. She was not so much afraid as disappointed, full of grief, hate, despair and hopelessness.

She emptied the glass down the basin, refilled it and rinsed it out again and again. Then she lay down, let the nurse take her temperature and feel her pulse, took her two sleeping tablets and wished the nurse goodnight.

At three in the morning she climbed out of the window, nimble as a cat, making no sound. She saw a flower bed six

yards below, with soft earth to break her fall. Only six yards—that cliff had been higher. She jumped, drawing up her legs, landed in the flower bed and rolled over and over, but she reached the lawn beyond it unharmed. She lay there staring up at her open window, which looked very far away now. Six yards isn't that far, though, she thought, with soft earth to land on. The good earth, Mother Earth . . . vague memories of lessons about the old Germanic gods floated through her mind, of the goddess Erda, mother of the world.

She crawled across the grass until she was beside the road, a private road leading through a small wood, and then she jumped up and ran and ran, like a well-trained infantryman making for cover. The path went uphill, she saw lights on the main road ahead, the neon glow of freedom and survival. She *must* survive, with the child inside her. And she felt thirst again, the same as ever, a longing for the burning liquid which would flow through her bloodstream and change the world.

It was seven in the morning, when the nurses went around with thermometers again, before anyone discovered that Karin von Putthausen's room was empty.

The news, phoned through to Dr. Lingen, had him out of bed in a flash. His wife Brigitte stared at him uncomprehendingly as he rushed out of the room, uttering a hoarse cry.

"Konrad!" she called after him. "What on earth is it? You look terrible! Can I help?"

"No!"

After a while he came back into the bedroom and leaned against the doorpost, sweat running down his face. He stared at his wife, a long, silent look. She got out of bed and came over to him. She wore a short, flimsy nightgown; she was a beautiful, mature woman, with coils of coppery brown hair.

"Konrad, what's the matter?" she said. "Darling, say something!"

"Brigitte, do you love me?" he asked hoarsely. She started, covering her breasts, visible through the thin material, with her hands, as if she were suddenly ashamed of his gaze after years of marriage.

"Konrad, you're not well . . . you're so pale!" she whispered in alarm.

"Brigitte, you must try to keep on loving me!" he said, in hollow tones. "I think I'm going to need love, a great deal of love."

Then he turned and strode out of the room. He locked

himself into his dressing room and came out fully clothed, carrying a small crocodile suitcase and swaying slightly. For the first time, Brigitte caught the smell of alcohol on his breath, noticed his glazed, rigid glance, and saw the yellowish tinge of his skin.

"Konrad, you're not going away?" she said. It sounded like a cry for help.

"Yes, Brigitte, I am. I'm going away to hell!" he cried. "And don't try to follow me, you don't know the way!"

That was the last Brigitte Lingen heard of her husband for some time.

A kind of compulsion led him first to Father Merckel. He rang the doorbell of the rectory of St. Christopher's at eight in the morning, to be told by the distinctly annoyed housekeeper that the priest was still asleep.

"Then go and wake him up!" Lingen told her, pushing past her into the hall. "Why should *he* sleep while the world around him is crumbling?"

The housekeeper looked at Dr. Lingen in amazement, but she went off to wake Father Merckel. This was quite a difficult task, since he had gone to bed late after working on his book of sermons, with the assistance of alcohol. But when the name of Dr. Lingen eventually penetrated the mists of his brain, he jumped out of bed coughing, staggered to the washbasin and put his head under the cold tap. "Coming!" he spluttered through a mouthful of water. He reached for a package of menthol candies, crammed four into his mouth, crunching them up and then breathing into the hollow of his hand to see if any smell of alcohol remained on his breath. He dressed, combed his white hair, and went down.

Dr. Lingen was waiting in the study, examining the carved oak prie-dieu, the showpiece of the room. He turned his head as Father Merckel came in and pointed to it. "Very old, isn't it?"

"Three hundred years old; it came from St. Anthony's convent in Oberkarnten." Merckel closed the study door; his housekeeper was standing out in the hall listening. "Do you want to hear any more about Oberkarnten, doctor? Was it your thirst for information that brought you here?"

Lingen turned slowly to face Merckel, who could judge his visitor's condition at once, from his watery eyes.

"She's gone," said Lingen, in hollow tones.

"Who has gone?"

"That girl, the one from the hospital. You remember! I had her transferred to my own clinic yesterday—I *had* to, she was talking to everyone! And yesterday evening I took the first step toward disposing of her . . . I gave her radioactively contaminated water; it would have induced leukemia. But she ran away in the night. It was discovered at seven this morning. It's the end of me, both as a doctor and a human being."

"Lingen, you were already finished as a human being! And you only kept going as a doctor by propping yourself up with a drink. I don't know why you're so sorry for yourself." Merckel stood up and went over to his sideboard, opened a door and brought out three bottles. "Let us take our comforters to our hearts, Lingen! A schnapps?"

Dr. Lingen nodded. "I have left," he said.

"You mean you're running away?"

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"Nowhere—anywhere. I don't know yet." Seeing Merckel about to make some comment, Lingen raised his hands. "No, don't tell me it's a cowardly way out! I know it is—but think of the scandal brewing! As a doctor, as a psychiatric expert, I took advantage of a patient suffering from delirium tremens, made her my mistress and got her pregnant. If *that's* not a scandal, I don't know what is!"

"It's a scandal whether you run away or stay and face it."

"But if I run, I shan't know any more about it." He reached for the glass Merckel was offering him, and drank greedily. "You know, Father, we alcoholics are wretched cowards. We can't face life as it is. I'm a coward, I always was. My whole life has only been a façade—my real self is a miserable specimen of humanity!"

"Stop wallowing in self-pity." Merckel himself drank straight from the bottle. "You're a genius in your own way; your operations are amazing."

"They're nothing short of miraculous! And those hours in the operating theater I look at myself in the mirror, asking my reflection: Konrad, how do you manage it? And as I can supply no answer, I go on drinking." Lingen took the bottle from the pastor, and refilled his glass. "But you, Father, why do *you* drink? You have God to lean upon, you can draw strength from

His words—or at least, so you say when you preach to others! *You* have no reason to drink."

For a moment Father Merckel said nothing. He went over to his prie-dieu and knelt. "For heaven's sake, you're not going to pray now?" inquired Lingen.

"I should like to answer your question, doctor." Merckel's deep voice was shaking as if he had just run a hard race. "And to do that, I must pray. Pray for understanding and forgiveness. Listen, I have been through two world wars. I was at Verdun, where we came to know what hell must be like, and Langemarck, where we were slaughtered like cattle. And then the Second World War . . . I was a chaplain in Russia, on the edge of the ring around Stalingrad. Once I was flown into Gumrak, in the middle of December, and I saw dying men lying around like rotting cabbages, the wounded molding in cellars, the road to Pitomnik littered with bodies. And there I stood among them; I was supposed to hold up my crucifix and tell them God was with them, 'Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth.' It was madness! What did I do? Well, I went around, sitting by frozen corpses in the goods trucks of Gumrak, I crouched in cellars to close men's eyes, I told the dying, 'Yes, my son, I'm a priest, yes, you will certainly get to Heaven, that's the least God can do for you! You have a claim on God now, and you must press it—show Him the stump of your leg, your shattered face, your guts spilling out, your pierced lung, the hands that were shot away. They're your pass to Paradise, that is why God keeps silent now, you already have your ticket to Heaven . . .' I dare say I was a strange sort of priest, but I could not lie to them. I was flown out of the battle zone again, I waited for some sign from God, for a miracle, and I'm still waiting. What do I see? I see a materialistic society sprung from the blood of those fifty-five million dead in the last war, and I stand in my pulpit to proclaim the love of God and the virtue of the Ten Commandments, which are broken daily, hundreds of times. What can I do about alcohol? How else would I get the courage to stand at the alter? Langemarck, Verdun, Stalingrad, Hiroshima . . . Praise ye the Lord! Only the bottle can help me to keep going."

And he took the schnapps bottle back from Lingen, put it to his thick lips and drank.

"We seem to be of the same mind, Father!" said Lingen, hoarsely, rising from his chair. "I only came to say goodbye—

I wonder, where shall we meet again, in heaven or in hell?"

"Between both, in limbo, where we belong." Father Merckel leaned against his prie-dieu. "Where are you going, Lingen?"

"Into limbo—as you have just said!"

After Peter Kaul's visit from his family, he had become more resigned to his fate. He had three bad attacks when he longed for alcohol, feeling his guts burning and his hands shaking, his head jerking convulsively as he vomited up bile, and thinking he would happily commit murder for a glass of beer or a schnapps. At these times Judo Fritz came, gave him an injection in the buttocks, and handed him a glass of liquid mixed with ether, which induced such nausea that he thought he would bring up his entire internal system.

Apart from these times, he went on working on Fritz's bungalow, wiring it for lighting, heating, washing machine, deep freeze. He got to know Fritz's wife, and learned that Fritz's surname was Kellermann and his wife was called Lucie. She was a small, fragile, flighty creature who looked like a flowering cactus shoot beside the gigantic Fritz. "What d'you think of her?" asked Fritz, proudly, and Kaul told him, "I think you're a lucky man!" Fritz beamed. "You know something? She's a lot tougher than me really! She can wind me around her little finger, Lucie can—and in bed . . . wow! She used to be a barmaid, my Lucie. Funny, eh? A barmaid and a mental nurse. I still don't know what she saw in me."

Kaul was not sure either, for Lucie Kellermann was rather too friendly to him, once following him down to the basement of the bungalow, where she brushed suggestively against him, sighed, and whispered, "Are you really an alcoholic, dearie?"

"Yes," Kaul told her firmly. "They're treating me for VD too."

"Oh, that's a shame . . ." And Lucie Kellermann went away. Kaul stood there in the basement for some time, thinking of Susanne. Did *she* act like that? Did she brush against the gas man or the sewing machine repairman? Were all women the same? No, not Susanne! He'd married an angel, Susanne was much too good for him.

The scandal about Dr. Lingen, and his disappearance, was hushed up. Professor Brosius made sure the press did not get

hold of any details; all that was released to the public was the fact that the police were searching for Karin von Putthausen, a mental patient, and anyone with information to give should contact them. Lingen himself was a rather different matter. Brosius was not averse to spreading a few rumors, while appearing to deflate the sensational items of news being passed around. "My good friend Dr. Lingen has suffered a slight nervous breakdown as the result of overwork, that's all." When asked, "But what about this baby they say your patient was expecting?" he replied, smiling, "Oh, come—do you seriously think Lingen would do a thing like that?" They did; gossip multiplied. Brigitte Lingen shut herself up at home, and everyone knew the police had interviewed her three times, because Brosius was so staunch in her defense—"That poor woman, with the police in and out of her house the whole time!"

However, there was no trace of Dr. Lingen himself, or of Karin von Putthausen. They had been swallowed up by the jungle of the big city, they were driftwood on the sea of their addiction.

Soon after Lingen's disappearance, Father Merckel had gone to see Susanne Kaul. He let her fry him a couple of eggs—she wanted to show her gratitude to the priest, and knew no other way—and refused the bottle of beer which she hesitantly took out of the refrigerator. Susanne nodded, abashed. "I'm sorry, Father. Of course, you don't drink.".

"Well, I have a drink now and then, my dear. On special occasions." Merckel sat down with his back to the tempting bottle on the table. "But I came to see you about Gundula."

"Gundula?" Susanne cast a quick glance at the pram.

"Yes; I've been looking into financial ways and means to help. The charitable organizations run by the Church, our own parochial sick benefit funds, various welfare schemes—I think I've done it. We could get Gundula into a home."

"A . . . a home?" Slowly, Susanne shook her head. "Peter's been taken away from us—one in a family, isn't that enough?"

"I meant Gundula would go to a special clinic."

"No! I won't give her up."

"My dear, these days children like Gundula can have special treatment. I don't say they can be completely cured, that would be a miracle—but great improvements in their condition can be made."

Susanne took a deep breath. "Father, you're a good man,"

she said. "I know you just want the best for us all, but the best thing *really* would be to have Peter home again! We need him, Father—it's not just me, the children need him too. He's not a bad man, he was desperate, that's all." She was crumpling her apron and biting her lower lip. "And it's all my fault. I came to see you, Father, and then . . . oh, it was all so sudden! I told Peter about Gundula, something just snapped inside me, and now I'm sorry. Listen, I could go out working part-time, in an office, cleaning, anything—I could leave the children with the neighbors—if only Peter was back! We could make a go of it together, Father." Suddenly, she had an idea. Her head went up and her blue eyes looked challengingly at Merckel. "Father, I'll let Gundula go to that clinic if you'll get Peter back home for me!"

"Oh, if only it were as simple as that . . . and what about Hubert Bollanz?"

"Hubert Bollanz? Who's he?"

"You don't know the name?"

"No. Oh, wait a minute—yes, he was the man who came to call on Peter a few weeks ago. He asked me to remember him to Peter—oh, good heavens, I quite forgot!"

"Thank heavens you did forget." Father Merckel turned to look at the bottle of beer and drew it toward him. "You know, I think I will have that beer after all."

Susanne fetched a beer glass. Greedily, Merckel watched her pour the golden liquid, the foaming head rising above the rim of the glass.

"Your husband never mentioned this man Bollanz?" The first sip was like a healing draught.

"No, never. What about him?"

"Now, listen carefully, my dear." Merckel passed his hand over his eyes. "I suppose I am betraying a secret, the secret of the confessional—no, don't stare at me like that: I may not be the most conventional of God's servants, but believe me, I am one of the most faithful! And I know you are the only person who can really cure Peter."

"I am?" stammered Susanne.

"Your husband was tormented by a secret, and he drowned his torment in drink. Such a small secret, but so important. He felt himself guilty . . . and if you know the whole story, you'll be able to lift the burden of guilt from him. Love alone can heal . . ."

And Father Merckel began to tell her about the tragic death

of Johann Milbach, father of five, who had touched the electric wires Peter Kaul left uninsulated while he took half an hour's break for lunch.

7

When Frida Milbach's doorbell rang at ten in the morning she thought it was the postman. She was surprised to see a woman standing at the door, asking, "Could I have a word with you, Mrs. Milbach? It won't take long..."

Frida looked warily at the stranger. Someone trying to sell her detergents or corsets or polyunsaturated margarine, she supposed. Or a year's subscription to a women's magazine, with weekly tips on How to Spoil Your Husband!—The Way to a Man's Heart Is Through His Stomach!—Bring a Touch of Seduction to Your Marriage!

Frida sighed. "Sorry, I don't need anything," she said. "I'm a widow, I don't have money to throw around."

The word "widow" sent a shiver up Susanne Kaul's spine. Widowed because of Peter, she thought, and with five young children.

"That's why I came," she said, hesitantly.

"What, because I'm a widow?" The last trace of goodwill left Frida Milbach's angular face. "I don't want any life insurance. I've got a policy already—I had so many quotations from agents when my husband died I'd have had to be a millionaire to pay all the premiums. Vultures! And now you..."

"My name's Susanne Kaul," said Susanne quietly.

"Yes?" Frida opened the door a little wider. Susanne realized, in surprise, that the name did not seem to mean anything to her. "Well, Miss Kaul—"

"Mrs. Kaul. I'm Peter Kaul's wife. Don't you remember my husband?"

"No."

"But I..." Thrown off of her stride, Susanne pushed the fair hair back from her forehead. "My husband was working with yours when...he was the one who..." She could not go on; she buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

Frida Milbach hesitated. Susanne's tears had caught her off balance, she could see no reason for them. The neighbors, she thought—God, if they see a woman outside my door crying their tongues will be wagging for weeks! "You'd better come in," she said. She closed and locked the door, even put the chain across it, and guided Susanne into her big kitchen. A dark-haired little girl of four was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking cocoa and eating a piece of bread and margarine.

"What's the matter with that lady, Mummy?" she asked.

"Be quiet, Monika." Frida made Susanne sit down on a kitchen chair. "Now, what's wrong?"

Susanne took her hands from her face. She looked at Frida Milbach with the eyes of a tired, hunted animal. "My husband's in the State Mental Hospital," she said softly. "In the alcoholics' wing..."

"Monika, go and play in the bedroom," said Mrs. Milbach swiftly. "Wait a moment, please, Mrs. Kaul." She picked up the child's plate and mug, led her out of the room, and then returned. "No need for the children to hear this kind of thing," she said, sitting down opposite Susanne. "They've had enough trouble to bear, with their father's death and all."

Susanne bowed her head. She hardly dared look at Frida Milbach: a forthright, resolute woman who had surely been pleased when her five children were born, who was a good mother, kept the place spotlessly clean, always had a good meal ready for Johann Milbach when he came home.

"My husband drinks," said Susanne, her voice faltering. "He's been drinking for the last couple of years—he drinks because he can't bear to have it on his conscience, he's being blackmailed and the liquor is his only way of escape from his own guilt over your husband..."

"Johann?" Frida froze, staring at her visitor. "What on earth did Johann have to do with your husband and his drinking problem?"

"He—he died because of what Peter did!" said Susanne, with the last of her strength.

"Oh, nonsense!" Frida clasped her hands in her lap, because she found she was suddenly trembling. She remembered the day they had brought Johann home so clearly. At first she did

not take it in, she thought he was merely unconscious, a stone had fallen on his head, or a pit prop or a tool. There are plenty of such dangers underground. Perhaps gas poisoning... But then they had laid Milbach on the bed, folding his hands on his chest, tucking a rolled-up handkerchief under his chin to keep his jaw from dropping open. And then she understood; she remembered doing the same thing for her father and mother—and she screamed, lashing out when they tried to drag her away from the bed...

That had been a dreadful day... Frida let out a long, deep breath as she looked at Susanne's bowed head. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse, not like her usual tones.

"My husband touched an uninsulated cable; he was electrocuted. It was his own fault; his friends told me later. He saw the wires lying around, he was going to cut off a few yards during the midday break. It was for us, he was rewiring our bedroom. He didn't realize they were live. He tried cutting them, that was when he died."

Frida was staring at her white kitchen cupboard; Johann had repainted it two weeks before his death. "It was entirely his own fault, Mrs. Kaul."

"But it was my husband who left the wires there—he didn't switch off the current when he went for lunch."

There was profound silence between the two women. They looked at each other, and suddenly they felt a deep sense of companionship in suffering. "So here we are, you and I," said Frida quietly. "And now what? Your husband was not to know that my Johann..."

"But he left the wires uninsulated..."

"If only Johann hadn't wanted to steal a few yards..."

"If only Peter had switched off the current..."

"Well, it's a hard life for us women," said Frida briskly, standing up. "Now, I'm going to make us a nice strong cup of coffee." She put water on to boil and measured five spoonfuls of coffee into a pot. "Here I am left with five children, just because Johann wanted to save a few cents. Have you got children too?"

"Yes, three. My youngest is mentally handicapped."

"Oh, my God—you mean... because of your husband's drinking?"

"That's what the doctor says."

"And all for a few yards of electric cable! Life's a funny thing, isn't it?" The kettle on the electric stove began to sing.

"Such plans we had when we were first married! A little house out in the country some day, a small car, perhaps a summer vacation every year, a garden to grow vegetables and flowers, a good education for our boys so they'd become something better than miners. And then he goes and touches a bit of wire, and it's all over in a second. Sometimes I still can't grasp it. I find myself thinking of an evening: Johann will be coming off shift now, and I even lay him a place—then Fritz comes home, that's my eldest, he doesn't say anything, just puts the things away again, and I realize Johann will never come home off shift again. It's hard to get used to it." The kettle came to a boil and whistled. Frida turned it off and poured boiling water on the coffee; its strong aroma filled the warm kitchen. "But as for your man, Mrs. Kaul," said Frida, "he wasn't to blame! Why should it drive *him* to drink?"

"He does blame himself, though." Suddenly Susanne grasped Frida's hand and held it tightly. "Will you come to the hospital with me and see him?" she asked. "Will you tell Peter it wasn't his fault? He wouldn't believe anyone else—but he'd believe you. You could convince him, you could save us all, him and me and the children. Otherwise there's no hope..."

Frida poured the coffee, her fingers shaking. "When can we visit?" she asked expressionlessly.

"Any time! I know Professor Brosius will give permission if I ask him."

"What about tomorrow, then? I'll bring the children too." Frida sat down, heavily. She had mastered her grief, she was the stronger of the two now. "Let's drink our coffee. I'm very glad you came to see me, Mrs. Kaul."

An hour later Susanne left Frida's apartment. She had met two more of the Milbach children, a couple of boisterous boys coming home from school. Healthy, vigorous children; they've recovered from the tragedy, thought Susanne. But we're still down in the depths. She felt sick again on her way home, and was just able to get to a cafe, reach the lavatory, and bring up Frida's coffee and apple cake. Pale, Susanne leaned against the tiled wall. And now this, too, she thought, laying her face against the smooth tiles. How cruel life can be.

When Father Merckel told Professor Brosius the background, he readily agreed to let the Milbach family visit. "This throws quite a new light on the case!" he said, making several

notes. "A clear guilt complex—why didn't anyone tell us before?"

"Mrs. Kaul herself did not know the truth, and as for me—well, the secrets of the confessional . . ."

So at three o'clock the next day Frida and her five children were waiting in the hospital reception area. Judo Fritz had promised to bring them up when Susanne had prepared her husband for the visit. The children stood around, looking at the doctors and nurses, laughing at a harmless lunatic sweeping the path outside the door, and occasionally trying to play the handle of his broom as if it were a clarinet.

"Don't you laugh like that!" Frida told them crossly. "It's not funny. You ought to feel sorry for these poor people."

"That man we're going to see—is he like that?" asked Benno, the second eldest.

"I've no idea. I don't know him at all." Frida gathered her little flock around her. "But I can tell you this: you just behave yourselves, and if this Mr. Kaul should do anything odd, don't you dare laugh, or you'll get a good spanking!"

Judo Fritz appeared and waved to them, grinning all over his broad, apelike face. "He doesn't know who it is," he said cheerfully. "Mrs. Kaul didn't want to tell him straight out, but he's pleased to have visitors."

"Is—is he lucid?" asked Frida, a little fearfully.

"Lucid? Sure, he's always lucid; sane as you or me, except when he drinks, but he can't do any of that here. Right, come on, then."

Peter was sitting at the table in his room eating a strawberry cream pudding Susanne had brought him. Kaul was happy. Professor Brosius had said he was making good progress, Judo Fritz had become a genuine friend, who smuggled him in cigarettes, Susanne had come to see him, bringing this delicious pudding—one way and another life was good, except for the torments he suffered every Friday. It was like having an internal alarm clock which went off on Fridays, to send fire chasing through his brain. On Fridays Kaul would beg Judo Fritz for a drink, just a little one, only a beer, a small beer . . . on Fridays he needed the sedative injections that left him in a drowsy stupor. By Saturday the attack was over, but it left him as exhausted as if he had really spent the whole night drinking. However, by Sunday, when Susanne and the children now had a regular visiting time, he would be cheerful and seem quite normal: he walked in the garden with them, played badminton

with Petra and Heinz, pushed little Gundula around the flowerbeds in her pram, and talked to Susanne about all the things he was going to do when they let him out.

But they both knew that would not be very soon—not while he still had a periodic craving for drink.

There was a knock at the door. Kaul looked up, and Judo Fritz came in, beaming like Father Christmas. "Here's your visitors, mate!" he said. "Not exactly Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs—more like Frida and the Five Kids!"

Kaul glanced at Susanne, who looked away. He looked back at Fritz and his broad grin. Whatever this is about, it's all arranged, he thought. Susanne knows. Frida and the five kids . . . who could that be?

Five. Where else did the number five loom large in his life?

Suddenly he guessed, he knew! He jumped up, his chair falling to the ground, and clung to the table, head thrust forward.

"No!" he shouted. "No, not that! How do you know? Who told you? Has Bollanz been talking?" He staggered, and Susanne ran to support him, but he pushed her away. "You've all let me down, even my wife! You want to destroy me. You're just waiting for me to go out of my mind, then there'll be one less mouth to feed, then you can get married again—to someone who doesn't drink, who brings you home his full paycheck and gives you two or three more children—good healthy kids, not poor idiots. That's what you want! I'm taking too long to die, right?" And so on. Fritz let him rave until he had to stop for breath, then he took three long strides across the room, picked Kaul up by the scruff of his neck like a rabbit, carried him to the bed and dropped him on it.

"You shut your trap and listen!" he said roughly. Susanne stood by the table, white and rigid; Petra and Heinz were huddled together in a corner of the room, while Gundula lay in her pram, playing with her colored blocks, babbling and laughing mindlessly.

"Come in," Judo Fritz said, standing in the doorway. "Nothing to worry about, I'm here."

Frida came into the room, marshaling her five children ahead of her, and Judo Fritz shut the door. Kaul took in the whole group at a glance, seeing the five children, and Frida behind them, tall, strong, robust, with a faint smile on her lips. Kaul rolled over and buried his face in his pillows, shouting something they could not make out; his body was shaking.

"Mr. Kaul," Frida began. Peter did not turn over, but he gradually stopped shaking, as if he were listening to her. "Mr. Kaul, I've come to clear something up. There's been a mistake." Frida put her hands on the shoulders of the two little girls in front of her. "I brought the children so they could know about it too. It was an accident they lost their father, but an accident that could have been avoided. It was Johann's own fault."

Kaul turned over then, his face distorted. "That's not true. I turned the current on!"

"Yes, but it was Johann who touched the wires."

"And that killed him! I killed him!"

"No. Johann was going to take several yards of electric cable; that was how it happened."

"He was going to . . . ?" Kaul sat up, staring at Frida and her children. "But . . ."

"Do you think I'd say this if it wasn't true? I loved Johann, we had seven children and five lived, and I want my children to love and respect their father even though he's dead. But facts have to be faced: Johann was going to steal that cable. It was for our bedroom. He didn't need to, God knows! But you know what men are like—they see something lying around and they help themselves, they don't feel it's stealing, they call it having an eye to the main chance . . . all the same, it's against the law!" Frida was looking at her eldest son, recently apprenticed to a locksmith; he understood the gist of his mother's admission. He bowed his head, ashamed of the tears in his eyes. Father, he thought. So that's how it happened.

"Johann was going to steal that cable, and it was not your fault the wires were live, Mr. Kaul. Johann had no business touching them at all."

"But Bollanz—" Kaul groaned. "Bollanz was there. He says Johann touched the wires by accident, they were hanging down into the gallery . . ."

"Who is this Bollanz?" asked Frida.

"He was working with Johann. He . . . he . . ." Kaul fell silent.

Susanne moved at last, relaxing her rigid pose. "He's been blackmailing Peter ever since."

"Well, Mr. Kaul, believe me, it was not your fault, and I am telling you so in front of my children."

Peter looked at her again, and her five wide-eyed children. So it was all for nothing, he thought. Twenty percent of his pay handed over to Bollanz every Friday, his need for oblivion,

his drinking, his subsequent self-disgust, poor little Gundula an idiot, Susanne's dreary life, his own despair, the cool waters of the Ruhr, the dead fish with its shimmering silver belly, the pale full moon, the hospital, Ward 70 in Wing 3 . . . all for nothing! Kaul collapsed on the floor at the foot of his bed, beating his head on the floorboards, Judo Fritz opened the door and pushed Frida Milbach and the frightened children out into the corridor, then ran back to help Susanne lift Peter's limp body to the bed.

Petra and Heinz, motionless in the corner by the window, watched their mother put a cold, wet cloth on their father's forehead and rub his chest. Fritz went out again, to take the Milbachs downstairs. "He'll be better now," said Fritz, shaking Frida's hand. "Thanks! That'll do him more good than we could do with a hundred injections."

When Kaul opened his eyes, he saw Susanne's fair head bending over him. He smiled like a child, took her thin face in both hands and stroked her hair.

"Susanne . . ." he said softly.

"Yes, Peter."

"I've made such a mess of everything—robbed you of years of your life . . ."

"We'll be all right now, Peter. Only a few more weeks and we'll be together again—all six of us."

"Six? What do you mean, six?" Kaul clasped Susanne's head more firmly. "Susi, we're not . . . ?"

"Yes, there are going to be six of us." She nodded, smiling happily at him. "I'm quite certain now."

"Oh, Susi." He dropped his hands and turned his head aside. "I'm not worth it," he said softly.

Susanne laid her cheek against his forehead. "You're worth more to me than all the gold in the world," she said.

Heinz nudged Petra. "They've made up again," he whispered.

"Same as usual!" Petra made a dismissive gesture. "Till next Friday!"

The first thing Konrad Lingen did in Cologne was to look for a small hotel. He paid for a week in advance, took a bath, put on a clean shirt and went out shopping. He bought four bottle of schnapps, took them to bed and drank himself senseless. He spent the next morning running from his bed to the lavatory and back, vomiting again and again until he could

only retch and bring up a little bile, then deadening the burning in his guts with more alcohol. By the fourth morning he had stopped even making the effort to get out of bed and go to the lavatory; he simply vomited on the tiled floor and the bedside rug, then rang for the chambermaid, pointed to the mess and said thickly, "There you are, that's your job."

On the seventh day the chambermaid refused point blank to enter Room 14 again. That evening Lingen was thrown out of the hotel, the manager threatening to call the police if he made any fuss.

He wandered through the Old Town, half drunk, stood beside the Rhine, looking across its dirty yellow waters, bought himself a bottle of vermouth, sat down on a bench beside the river and drank the cheap, sweet wine.

He was not unhappy, far from it. At last he felt free. No appointments, no operations, no psychiatric reports to be made, no need to play the part of social charmer, member of the riding club, the tennis club, the golf club—all that was over, thank God! He was free to go where he wanted, drink when he wanted, stand under the bridge to piss into the river, stare at women's breasts and swaying bottoms as they passed, thinking how they'd look undressed, or in nothing but a pair of panties. Lingen sat by the Rhine till it was getting dark, with his suitcase beside him, then made his unsteady way to a taxi and told the cab driver, "Take me somewhere I can stay—never mind where, just a place to sleep, where they don't throw you out for drinking in your room."

The driver took him to the Pension Blades, a guesthouse in an alley in the Old Town, not far from the Rhine. The building had survived the war with comparatively little bomb damage, its stairs smelled of mold and sweat, and they creaked at frequent intervals all night long, since the occupants of the seventeen rooms were constantly changing. Emmerich Blades, who ran the place, kept the rooms reasonably clean, and charged three dollars extra if his guests went to bed with their shoes on ("A real gentleman takes off everything except his wedding ring" was his maxim). He could outface anyone who tried haggling over the price afterward, and he knew how to demand money in advance from inexperienced young hopefuls ("You soon get to know who they were from their uncertain expression"). Dr. Lingen was given Room 10, and put to bed by Emmerich and his wife Henny, who fixed morphine and would do the Dance of the Seven Veils for twenty-five dollars.

Emmerich and Henny were at his bedside next morning to welcome him with a cheerful "Good morning, doctor!" Being cautious folk where business was concerned, they had gone through their new guest's wallet, inspected his papers with considerable surprise, and left his money untouched except for one hundred dollars, for which they had left a punctilious receipt. Dr. Lingen raised himself on his elbow, and looked at Henny's bright eyes. Dilated pupils, he thought. Morphine, probably. And the man—bloated face, thick lips, watery smile: he drinks and sleeps around a lot. Lingen fell back on the pillows again. Journey's end, he thought. Man stripped of all his civilized appurtenances, spiritually naked—lower than the beasts!

"A drink, doctor?" Emmerich had a greasy voice.

"Yes, please."

He clutched the offered glass and took the first sip. Vermouth. Of course, drinking spirits all the time would become too expensive, but cheap vermouth had the same effect. Dr. Lingen emptied the glass in two long draughts, and felt the burning pain in his guts recede . . . his brain was clearing too, he no longer saw mists swirling around, with Henny Blades's staring pupils swimming in them like two huge jellyfish. He could make out his new surroundings.

A window with dirty net curtains, an iron bedstead, a cupboard, a washbasin, a chair, a table, a sheepskin bedside rug (Room 10 was the best room in the place), a mirror reflecting the bed (Room 10, after all, *was* the best room), a washstand with a china figure of a sylph-like girl on it; someone had added blobs of red lipstick to her nipples, and black shoe polish for her pubic hair. Emmerich Blades had laughed a lot over that; he got some comical guests here!

Dr. Lingen sat up again and swung his legs out of bed. He was in his underpants, his suit hanging over the chair. Emmerich had undressed him.

"So you know who I am?" asked Lingen. "I take it you don't ask too many questions here?"

"'Sright," said Blades, amiably.

"I don't want to be disturbed. Do you object to my drinking?"

"Not so long as the goings-on in the other rooms don't bother you, doc."

Lingen shook his head. "Can you get me a couple of bottles?" he asked.

Emmerich nodded. "Anything you fancy, doc. From champagne to beer!"

"Make it champagne, then." Lingen staggered as he got out of bed, and Henny kindly supported him, picked up his trousers, held the waistband open and helped him into them. Since his fingers were still numb, she even did up his fly for him. You got service at the Pension Blades!

Emmerich hurried off to fetch the champagne, while Lingen shaved, watched by Henny. He smiled at her in the mirror. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Thirty-three."

"You still look all right, in spite of the drugs."

"I guess I do. You're not so bad yourself, come to that. How about getting to know each other better, some time Emmerich's drunk again?" Her dilated eyes glowed.

"I shall be too drunk for that myself, my dear!"

Blades came back with two bottles of champagne. He uncorked one, put it in the washbasin, and rubbed his hands. "That'll be twenty dollars, doc."

Lingen threw down two ten dollar bills and picked up the bottle. His first few sips were like a dip in an icy mountain lake—but then the glow of the alcohol ran through him, relaxing his cramped muscles. He stroked the neck of the bottle, caressing the curve of it . . . he could feel it, could feel every unevenness in the glass, he had his sense of touch back.

Lingen stayed alone in his room for two hours, and only drank one of the bottles. He paced restlessly up and down, hearing the hippopotamus-like grunts of a daytime lover through the thin wall between himself and the room next door; he stood by the window and looked down at the dirty yard, where a child sat on a dustbin eating a piece of bread and butter.

A knock at the door startled him. The police! he thought. Checking up. Then he told himself to keep calm. "Come in," he said.

A woman entered the room. An attractive woman. She swayed as she walked, her skirt was short and her legs were long, her dress fitted closely around breasts and hips. Her light brown, tinted hair fell in waves to her shoulders. But there were sharp lines at the corners of her mouth, her eyes were reddened inside their black eyeliner, her face was a little too full, smooth but slack, like a balloon losing air.

Dr. Lingen waited.

"Hello; I'm Jutta," said his visitor. "The Countess, they call me." Her smile would have been attractive but for her over-painted lips. "Guess what—I really was married to a French count once! Comte de Broussac, with an estate in Provence. His family threw me out when he died—but that's old history, you wouldn't be interested."

Lingen inclined his head slightly. "Well, Countess, I'm more interested to know why you've given me the pleasure of meeting you."

"We need you, doctor," said the Countess. She sat down gracefully in the only chair, crossed her legs and searched her handbag for cigarettes. Lingen looked at those legs. Her skirt had ridden up, showing pink underclothes edged with black lace. Pale, naked flesh gleamed between the lace and her stocking tops.

"Who are 'we'?" asked Lingen.

"It's like this: our doctor died just a few weeks ago. He was a good sort, he'd been living with us for years, he was like a father to us." The Countess sounded genuinely moved. Someone coughed next door. "We said twenty-five dollars," said the hippopotamus. "I want five dollars change." Mean, too!

"Dr. Blinker didn't stay in any hotel, he lived with us in the bunker. He drank like the rest of us, but he was there when we needed him. He even cut four bullets out of someone once, after a shoot-out on a building site! And then there were other things he did—for the girls, you know what I mean? They like a bit of fun, but if the fellows aren't careful enough—well, Dr. Blinker was there with his curette, scraped about a bit, and that did the trick. And now dear old Dr. Blinker's dead—cirrhosis of the liver, it gets us all in the end. But we don't have a replacement. Or we didn't till you turned up, Dr. Lingen . . . that made us feel hopeful." The Countess ground her cigarette out on the floor. "We're all private patients, doctor; payment in cash or kind, that's to say bottles or girls, whichever you fancy. Well, what do you think of the idea?"

"Not very much." Dr. Lingen moved away from the windowsill. "What my late colleague Dr. Blinker did was his affair, but I don't meddle around with curettage of that nature."

"Ethical views on the sanctity of life, eh?"

"Correct."

"Ah, well, we'll have to find someone else for that—but apart from that, doctor, how would you like to be personal

physician to a band of outlaws?"

"You sound very romantic, Countess!" Dr. Lingen smiled. The Countess gazed at his handsome, virile face, and thought: I can see myself falling in love with this man! "There's a delegation downstairs, waiting for your answer," she said.

"How well organized you are! I take it you are all derelicts?"

"Our delegation's the brains of the bunch, doctor. You'll soon get to know us: there's René the Gent, Emil the Fish, Jim the Donkey . . ."

Dr. Lingen laughed, went over to the washbasin, uncorked the other bottle of champagne and offered it to the Countess, who put it to her lips, still staring at Lingen. A man, she thought, feeling the insides of her thighs go weak. A real man! Maybe I'll know the pleasures of real love again . . . maybe I'll be happy once more, before I die.

"Very well, ask your friends in, Countess," said Dr. Lingen. "After all, we're all human—indeed, what could be more human than the likes of you and me?"

The Countess rose. "Maybe our luck isn't quite finished yet," she said softly. "Somehow I feel you were fated to end up here . . ."

A brief letter from a hotel manager in Cologne brought Lingen's family in Essen their first news of him.

"Dear Madam," it ran, "four days ago we had a gentleman here, occupying Room 14, who signed himself in the register as Dr. Konrad Lingen. Unfortunately, the management felt it impossible to accommodate Dr. Lingen for more than a week, owing to the fact that, during the last few days of his stay, he was soiling the room and the bedclothes, and behaving in such a way as to cause our other guests to complain.

"Dr. Lingen has now left the hotel, and we are taking the liberty of sending you the enclosed bill for cleaning, with particular reference to the provision of a new bedside rug, as the old one had been rendered unfit for further use . . ."

Brigitte Lingen read this letter, dry-eyed. She informed her lawyer at once, collected her daughter Viola from school, and showed her the letter.

"It's Father, isn't it?" said the girl, quietly.

"Yes. He's in Cologne. Well, at last we have some idea where to look for him. We must go to Cologne at once."

"But he's left this hotel."

"He's still in the city, I'm sure, and that gives us a lead.

We'll find him, wherever he's hiding. The police will know the kind of places to look. We'll bring him home—I know what happened now, there was no need for him to run away."

"What did happen, Mother?"

"I'll tell you some time later, darling. We must find Father first." Brigitte took the letter, put it in the glove compartment of her white sports car, and started the engine.

A few minutes later the car was speeding along the highway to Cologne.

At about the same time, Dr. Lingen kissed the Countess, and knew that there was no going back to his former life now.

8

But Brigitte Lingen, looking for her husband, found Cologne was the proverbial haystack. The best place to preserve your anonymity, the safest place to hide, is among the teeming masses of a big city.

The hotel manager gave Brigitte a precise description of his guest, whom he had never seen sober. He saw that the man's wife seemed composed enough to be told the facts, and he was frank with her. "My hotel may not be a three-star establishment," he finished, "but I still have my reputation to consider!"

"How much is there to pay?" asked Brigitte coldly.

"A hundred and twenty-five dollars, madam, if you don't mind. We have made you out a detailed account."

Brigitte paid it, and she and her daughter left the small, shabby hotel. They got back into the car and stared through the windshield at the people coming and going in the street.

"Why would Daddy do a thing like that?" Viola said. "He never used to drink . . . I mean, get really drunk. If there was a party, well, he'd be very amusing and so on—but why should he suddenly be like this?"

"I really don't know, darling." Brigitte passed her hand over her face. How can you explain something you don't understand yourself? "Perhaps it was something to do with that car accident he had, or maybe there was something worrying him. He must have had a shock. That girl Karin's disappearance upset him badly . . ." She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "I just don't know."

Her next visit was to police headquarters, where she was passed from room to room until she eventually reached the

superintendent in charge of the missing persons department. "This isn't a particularly unusual case," he said, meaning to be encouraging. "A man—sometimes a woman—realizes that he or she is an alcoholic and deliberately starts going downhill. After a while we pick them up, at certain places known to us—old wartime bunkers, hostels for the homeless, Salvation Army hostels, refuges run by various charitable foundations, or—" He looked at the sixteen-year-old girl, and went on, carefully, "Or—well, in certain other houses, you understand me, Mrs. Lingen? We make one of our regular raids, and when it comes to taking down particulars they turn out to be of no fixed abode. I believe we shall find your husband this way. It would be almost impossible to mount a systematic search for him—and he hasn't committed any crime to justify police action, or not yet. Let us have a good photograph of him, would you?" Brigitte had one with her; the police officer sighed as he looked at the picture of the man, taken in the operating theater: good-looking, intelligent face, white doctor's coat, confident bearing. "Hard to understand," he said. "Cologne does seem to attract alcoholics. And there are some highly intelligent men among them, such as your husband. We've picked up professors, managing directors, all sorts! If your husband doesn't surface of his own accord, as we all hope he will, Mrs. Lingen, then we're sure to find him some time in one of the bunkers or hostels. It wouldn't be a bad idea for you to prefer a charge against him, then we'll have grounds for holding him."

"Prefer a charge against my husband?" asked Brigitte quietly.

"Well, we must have *some* reason, if he hasn't committed any crime. You could make it a charge of failure to maintain his family, that's a useful one in cases like this. Then we can hold him once we find him."

Brigitte rose, slowly. Her knees suddenly felt so weak that she had to lean on the table.

"Superintendent, I still hope to get my husband back without going to such lengths as that. If . . . if you'd tell me the kind of places I might find him—I mean, where the alcoholics meet or spend the night . . ."

The superintendent looked at Brigitte in horror. "You surely don't intend to go into the bunkers yourself? Why, even our toughest men don't go there alone. You'd never—"

"I love my husband," said Brigitte softly.

Viola began to cry. The officer bit his lip. Out of the ques-

tion, he was thinking. A woman on her own, among those brutalized drunks! "Look, we were going to make a routine check on the bunkers and hostels the day after tomorrow anyway," he said, hoping to divert her. "Why not stay in Cologne till then? We'll do all we can to find your husband. Where are you staying?"

"Nowhere yet. We came straight from Essen."

"Then give me a call when you've found a hotel, would you?"

Brigitte nodded, and left the police station. Back in the car, Viola was still crying. "What shall we do now, Mummy?" she asked. "I feel so ashamed, thinking of Daddy being one of those people . . . suppose they knew at school!"

"We're going to look for Daddy, with or without the help of the police." Brigitte started up and drove out into the stream of traffic. "We'll look for a hotel first, then I'll make inquiries about the places where alcoholics meet."

"But how will you find out, Mummy?"

"I imagine any taxi driver would know." Brigitte stared through the windshield. They were driving along the ring road, but they saw nothing of the grandeur of the thousand-year-old city of Cologne, resurrected from the wartime ashes even more beautiful than before. Her mind was on the man who, at this very moment, was somewhere among the labyrinth of buildings and streets, sitting and drinking, removing himself further and further from humanity. Perhaps behind the window they were driving past just now . . .

"When will you go looking for him, Mummy?" asked the girl.

Brigitte braked and turned into the forecourt of a hotel by the Rhine. "Tonight, darling. I'm not frightened."

But she was; she felt half dead with fright.

Emil the Fish lived up to his name. Dr. Lingen had seldom seen a man with a closer resemblance to a haddock, and he had had plenty of opportunities for comparison, since oddities of the human physiognomy were frequent in the mental hospitals he visited. But he had never encountered anything like Emil the Fish before.

Emil had a flattened head, a broad mouth, bulging, bloodshot eyes, ears like fins, a horny protuberance of a nose: he did, indeed, look very much like a giant fish.

A high forceps delivery, thought Lingen, looking at Emil

with professional interest. Head badly deformed. Severe case of exophthalmic goiter, too.

Countess Jutta was sitting beside Lingen, her skirt hitched up, her face glowing with pleasure, a hectic gleam in her eyes. Emil the Fish goggled at the rumpled bed, licked his lips and scratched his right ear.

"Is it a deal, then?" he asked.

The man's voice surprised Lingen; it was deep and musical. It seemed impossible that it could come from such a mouth.

"No need to stare like that," added Emil. "I know how I look. Can't help it, can I? Well, are you really a doctor or are you putting us on? Let's see how much you know!"

He took off his jacket, pulled up his shirt and bared his chest. A freak of nature, thought Lingen, amused, a hairy fish!

"Okay, tell us what that is!" said Emil, pointing to a scar running from one nipple to the other.

"A sword thrust, but badly sewn up. You shouldn't have been left with that swelling around the edges of the scar."

Emil the Fish tucked his shirt in again. "He's right," he said, nodding to Countess Jutta. "Yes, he's a doctor." He cast another glance at the bed, and snorted. "Would you like to be our doctor, then?"

"By all means, if you need me."

"There's a party in the St. Cecilia bunker this evening. René the Gent's giving it; he just brought off a big deal. You can meet the rest of us there."

"I shall look forward to it." Dr. Lingen smiled; it was the superior and ironic smile which struck at its recipient's self-confidence. Emil the Fish suddenly looked awkward, nodded, left the room. Lingen knew that Jim the Donkey and René the Gent were waiting outside, but Jutta seated herself on his lap, with a rapid movement, kissed him and lay back in his arms.

"You're a wonderful man!" she breathed hoarsely. "We'll do fine again now that you're here." She looked at him thoughtfully, noticing the mocking smile still on his lips. "You mustn't look at us that way, you know," she said gently, stroking his mouth as if to wipe away the smile. "We're sensitive. We may be drunks and whores, but we can love and have friends, and we notice when people despise us or laugh at us, understand?"

"Indeed I understand, Countess." Dr. Lingen reached for a bottle on the bedside table behind him. "We shouldn't talk so much, Countess; there are better things to do." He drank

deeply and handed Jutta the bottle. "I have a beautiful wife, you know."

"I'm sure you have—a man like you!"

"And a charming daughter. And a big house on its own grounds, with a swimming pool and a tennis court and a paddock to ride in..."

"Yes, you're a big shot, doctor!" Countess Jutta drank, and tossed the empty bottle on the bed. "But where's all that now? Where's your beautiful wife and your charming daughter and all the rest of it? Not here, is it? But I'm here... so why not take me the way I am?"

"Yes, you're here," said Lingen, pulling Jutta toward him. His voice was hoarse. "Let's make the best of it."

The three dipsomaniacs outside the door, waiting for some indication that they could come in, heard the key turning in the lock instead.

"Ah, well!" said Emil the Fish. "You'll get to see the doc this evening. Right now he's busying giving the Countess her fix!"

They laughed loudly, and stumbled noisily down the steep stairs.

That evening, Karin von Putthausen died of alcohol poisoning in an attic bedroom of the big house belonging to her father, the great industrial magnate and landowner. No one was by the dying girl's bedside but old Martha, who had kept house here for thirty years and brought Karin up. The family's hard, feudal traditions demanded that a girl like Karin, who had disgraced the von Putthausen name, must be hidden away in a servant's attic room to die.

Karin died cushioned from reality by alcohol, eaten away by her addiction, the victim of passions stronger than her own will to live. She died in that state of intoxication which was her greatest happiness. Just before she lost consciousness she experienced a series of delightful hallucinations. She dreamed she was in the embraces of a man with a burning body and a mighty phallus that shone like the sun: as they copulated she felt herself go up in flames, the ground where they lay turned to lava, the sky was a sea of fire, time had turned back to the creation of the world and she and the sun god were conceiving a new earth, upon which living creatures could breathe only in the act of love.

Then death came, heaven and earth were extinguished, the flames died down and a gray sea smelling of liquor washed over everything.

Old Martha closed Karin's staring, open eyes, drew the sheet over the dead girl's pale face, and went down to the great hall where Baron von Putthausen was sitting among his hunting trophies, boars' heads, stags' antlers, staring into a void and waiting.

"It's all over?" von Putthausen asked, his voice calm.

"Yes, sir," Martha told him. "Just now."

"Did she . . . did she say anything?"

"No, sir."

"She never sobered up?"

"No."

Von Putthausen rose and went to the window, looking out at the trees in the grounds, the stream flowing through the park; all was quiet in the great hall, as old Martha stood there, hands folded and head bowed, beside the chair he had just left. A carved oak chair covered with tapestry, eighteenth-century Flemish work. The spirit of the place hardly seemed to have changed since that chair was made. Baron von Putthausen cleared his throat.

"When is the pastor coming?"

"In half an hour's time."

"Karin is to be buried in the family vault, very quietly. Get the pastor to choose a good time—say six in the morning, or eleven at night."

"Won't you be there, sir?"

"I am going on a hunting trip in the Carpathians; I leave in two hours." Von Putthausen turned and looked at Martha's silently critical eyes. "Buy some roses," he said slowly, maintaining the stony rigidity of his face with an effort. "Yellow ones. Karin loved yellow roses."

Somewhere at the other end of the great house a bell rang, and a little later a butler came in, an old man of almost seventy with white mutton-chop whiskers, like a character out of a Dickens novel.

"It's the doctor, sir."

Von Putthausen nodded. "Martha will take him up."

"He wants to speak to you, sir."

"What for? I know quite well my daughter died of delirium tremens. I don't need the doctor's condolences."

"The doctor says there was something else as well . . ."

"I don't want to hear it!" Von Putthausen made an angry gesture. "She's at peace now, and any secrets are dead with her. I'm not interested."

The butler went away again, followed by Martha. Von Putthausen watched until the heavy, carved door closed behind her, and only then did he let his face twist with pain. He laid his hand over his eyes as if the dim light blinded him.

His eldest son dead, killed on the Oder in 1945 . . . his second son, dead in a car accident . . . his wife, dead of stomach cancer . . . his daughter, his last child, dead of alcoholism. What was left of the von Putthausen world? An estate, an export firm in Hamburg, a bank account containing several millions, deeds, shares, property, a small stud. A fine world—for whom?

When von Putthausen was driving down the elm-lined avenue a couple of hours later, on his way to the airport to set off on his hunting trip, another black car passed on its way to the house with the coffin. An expensive coffin, the best money could buy. Von Putthausen looked straight ahead of him. I am the last of a dynasty, he thought.

Peter had another visitor. Judo Fritz was not quite sure whether he ought to let the man in. He seemed pleasant enough, he had brought Kaul some fruit, but somehow Fritz did not feel too happy about it.

"You work with Mr. Kaul?" he asked for the second time.

The man nodded. "Sure. I'm a real friend of his. Bollanz, that's the name. Hubert Bollanz."

"Mr. Kaul's never mentioned you." Though as he said it, Judo Fritz was not so sure. The name did seem slightly familiar.

"You wait, he'll know me the minute I get inside the room." Bollanz looked concerned. "Is he quite lucid, or is he . . . ?"

"Mr. Kaul is very well!"

"What's he doing here, then?"

"He's in for observation. One of those straightforward cases that merely requires rest and a change of scene for a full recovery." Judo Fritz cleared his throat; this was a useful remark which he had learned by heart and trotted out any number of times during his career. "Right, that'll be okay then," he added, reverting to his usual tones. "But if you're putting me on . . ."

Bollanz looked up at the giant. Well, I've got to try, haven't I? he thought. The flow of cash had dried up several weeks ago, but he still had installments on his car to be paid: Peter had been paying for that car till now.

Suddenly Judo Fritz was called away: two of the alcoholics in Ward 70 had been fighting over a newly admitted patient, just twenty, with a smooth, innocent face. He had smiled at one of the men and stroked the other's hair, whereupon the two thus favored had gone jealously for each other like two maddened bulls. "Soon fix that!" said Judo Fritz, flexing his huge hands. "Okay, you go in and see Mr. Kaul. I'll be with you when I've cooled that bunch off."

Kaul was sitting reading; when the door opened he hardly looked up from his book. No one had knocked, so it could only be one of the staff. Then he heard the voice. It was like a blow on the back of the neck.

"Afternoon, Peter!"

Kaul swung around. There stood Bollanz, a friendly smile on his face, holding a bag of fruit, from which he produced an apple.

"Cox's Orange, Peter. Kind of a winy flavor, I thought you'd like that!"

Peter dropped his book as a wave of heat swept through him. His heart felt as if it were pushing all the air out of his lungs. He opened his mouth and took two quick, deep, gasping breaths. "What—what are you doing here?"

"Just came to visit you, old friend!" Bollanz put down the bag of fruit, rubbed his hands, nodded to Kaul and tugged at his tie. He was obviously nervous, though he tried to appear at ease. "Thought I'd see how you were getting along—when you'd be back at work again and earning. It's the installments on my car, see? Things are getting a bit tight, so I reckoned . . ."

"You're not getting another cent out of me!" said Kaul.

"What?"

"Not a cent, I said!"

Bollanz put his head on one side. "Now look," he said threateningly, "you can make out you're a nut case in here, but that won't wash with me! I met poor Mrs. Milbach yesterday—pitiful, it is! Looks ten years older than her age. And those kids—it brings the tears to your eyes! Thin and pale, their poor little faces asking: Where's our Daddy . . . ?"

Bollanz had regularly softened Peter up with this kind of spiel for two years, and it had always worked before, crushing Kaul with a sense of his guilt as Johann Milbach's murderer. It seemed to be having the desired effect again. Kaul sat with his head bowed, his arms hanging. Bollanz was about to add the information that the eldest Milbach boy, a talented lad,

could only get a job as an unskilled laborer for lack of any money for further training, when Kaul leaped up and forward, as if catapulted out of his chair. Before Bollanz could even raise his arms in self-defense, Kaul had him by the throat and up against the wall.

"You bastard!" he said, quite calmly. His eyes gleamed feverishly, but his voice was remarkably level. "Frida Milbach came to see me, with all her children. I know the truth now, I know it all! You've been sucking me dry for two years, you've made Susanne and my children miserable, even poor little Gundula is your fault! Well, that's over now . . . now it's your turn to pay!"

He pressed his fingers into Bollanz's throat; Bollanz kicked out, getting Kaul in the belly. He doubled up with pain, but did not let go. He dug his fingernails further in, shaking Hubert and watching his face turn blue. "You bastard," he said softly. "You bloody bastard!" He increased the pressure.

With a desperate effort, Bollanz managed to break free. He ran, staggering, to the door and flung it open, shouting, "Help! Help!" Then his knees buckled and he fell face down in the corridor. The occupant of the next room, looking out, uttered a shrill scream. The alarm bell went off.

Peter was standing beside the unconscious Bollanz when Judo Fritz came running down from Wing 3, followed by a young resident, who went pale at the sight of the body. "He's killed him!" stammered the resident.

"Not him!" Judo Fritz took Kaul by the lapels of his jacket and picked him up, quite in his old manner, carrying him into the room like a helpless kitten. "Now, what's up, Peter?" he asked. "Come on, tell us, then! Isn't he your friend from work?"

Kaul dropped on the bed, staring at the open door. "Have I really killed him?" he asked quietly. "Have I killed him at last? My God, that's wonderful!"

Judo Fritz slapped his face: his favored method of bringing a patient to his senses. Professor Brosius did not personally go along with the practice of this theory, but he turned a blind eye to it, especially in Wing 3, Wards 69 to 72.

Kaul's head jerked back, and his eyes clouded. "It's him, Fritz!" he stammered. "He . . . my whole life, my drinking, so much misery . . . all his doing . . ."

"Here, you lie down," said Fritz, suddenly grasping what had happened. He gave Kaul a sedative injection and covered

him up. "Go to sleep, and you can tell the prof all about it tomorrow!"

Out in the corridor, the resident had gotten Bollanz into a sitting position. He had red marks on his throat, and his lips were split. "Look at this!" said the young doctor. "Half throttled! Attempted murder—the man should be put under restraint!"

"So he should, doctor." Judo Fritz looked critically at Bollanz, and then took the resident utterly by surprise by swinging back his hand and giving Bollanz such a resounding slap on the left cheek that he collapsed again, struggling for breath.

"Are you out of your mind, Kellermann?" cried the resident.

Without a word, Judo Fritz bent and slung Bollanz's limp body over his shoulder. "Kind of an act of solidarity, doctor," he said. "You wouldn't understand."

"But where are you taking him?" cried the puzzled doctor.

"Outside. I'll dump him on a bench."

"He'll raise hell!"

"Him? Not likely!" Judo Fritz shoved the limp body further back, so as to distribute its weight better, and carried it downstairs. The realization that every step he took was removing the cause of Peter's sickness further away from him made Fritz feel positively jubilant.

The St. Cecilia bunker was a survivor of the war. It's concrete rooms and corridors had not yet crumbled to ruin, though they were damp and moldy. Most such bunkers had been destroyed after the war, but somehow this particular air raid shelter had escaped, whether by design or accident no one now knew. Perhaps it would come in handy for the Third World War. Meanwhile, it was known to the police as a pad used by alcoholics, homosexuals, prostitutes, pimps and derelicts. For this very reason they let it continue to exist: it was a huge mousetrap for the officers of the law. The police raided the place regularly, at weekly intervals. Permanent residents of the bunker took no notice—they knew they were on a police register—but newcomers would run off down one of the corridors, making for the refuge of the main sewer in which it ended.

This was René the Gent's party. René was an elegant man in his late thirties, with a small moustache under his Roman nose, brilliantine on his black hair, and a dandified manner of dressing. He always carried a long umbrella; some people said it was a swordstick. René's language was elegant too; he would

never say, "Shit!" but pursed his lips and muttered, *"Merde!"* He treated ladies who took his fancy with great gallantry. There was a rumor that René had once been a hairdresser, but this was generally considered a slander. In conversation with Dr. Lingen René let drop the information that he had left school at sixteen, having taken the first set of public exams, and then continued his own education until he became a financial genius. He had a gift for picking up uncovered bills, buying with them, and then reselling the goods, transactions which represented a real profit. Today he was celebrating a really big deal. He had bought a car under an assumed and distinguished-sounding name, picked from the telephone directory, paid by check, driven it straight over the Dutch border and resold it there: not the sort of stroke of luck that comes your way every day, even if you are a financial genius like René.

"So why do I live in a bunker?" he replied in answer to Dr. Lingen's question. "Ah, well, doctor: if I live in a conventional apartment I'll have to be on the electoral register, pay taxes, be a good citizen with Big Brother watching me. I can't stand the idea! We outsiders are the only ones who really understand life. What do ethical ties and morals matter? Our life is free of all conventions!"

"And where should we be if everyone thought like that?" inquired Lingen.

"Oh, that would never do, doctor!" René was horrified. "I'd turn respectable like a shot—I can't live unless I'm against society!"

The party had been well organized. There were two barrels of beer in the main room of the bunker, and the guests brought their own bottles of wine or spirits with them. Women were a problem. Those who frequented the bunker themselves were worn out, unkempt, and dirty; other girls wanted money, and plenty of it, so there were never enough women to go around. The inmates of the bunker solved the problem by having the women on an hourly basis, but they were in difficulty again when the police took the prostitutes in after a raid—then they would have to comb the bunkers and hostels of Cologne for replacements.

The arrival of Dr. Lingen and Countess Jutta made a great sensation in the St. Cecilia bunker. They arrived by taxi, walking only the last few steps to the bunker. Dr. Lingen still had enough money of his own to be merely a guest, not an inmate. And I shall never live in such a place, he thought, going down

the slippery stairs into the underworld. I must make sure I always earn enough to pay for a room somehow. I may be a drunk, but by God, I'll be a drunk with a certain style! I've made this mummified so-called Countess my mistress, that's enough of the gutter for me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I'll be your doctor, with my scalpel and injections, my pills and tablets; in fact I'll be your chief, the way a jungle medicine man is the real chief of the tribe, but I'll keep my spirit unbroken!

René the Gent stood at the foot of the stairs to meet his guests, wearing a trendy dark blue single-breasted suit, and smelling of a French brand of after shave. "How nice to see you, doctor!" said René. He kissed the Countess's hand. "You're nearly the last to arrive, but of course you're the guests of honor. We have forty-seven guests waiting to meet you, doctor."

As they came in the hum of voices died down. The alcoholics were sitting on blankets around the damp concrete walls, their bottles jammed between their knees like musical instruments. Dr. Lingen looked around, feeling an extraordinary surge of emotion as he looked into those ruined faces, saw their dulled or glittering eyes, their flushed or dried-out skin, smelled the typical aroma of alcohol, sweat, and a sweetish smell of decay.

"Good evening," he said, his voice suddenly husky.

No one answered. And one of the strangest parties he had ever attended began. A party held in hell.

9

"You're still too sober, doctor," said René the Gent. The Countess had joined some of the others on a heap of rags; hectic flushes were coming and going in her pale face, and her hands shook violently. René looked at her, put his hand in his pocket and tossed her a small leather case. "Go on, do it now and don't spoil my party!" he said. He picked up a bottle of cognac and offered it to Dr. Lingen. "Come on, have a drink, doctor. Maybe it was a mistake of Jutta's to bring you along—your predecessor was much further gone than you, he used to spend eighteen hours a day drunk and practice medicine the other four. It strikes me you're the other way around. You'll find it hard to get us to take you seriously that way. We know who's really one of us and who's just dabbling his toes in the water!"

Lingen put the bottle to his lips and drank. The fiery spirit burned as it went down, like a corrosive acid in his esophagus. Perhaps I shall die of cancer of the esophagus, he thought, if the liquor doesn't kill me first; I shall become mummified like these ghosts of men and women there by the walls, I shan't be able to live without alcohol in my brain and blood, I shall drink until I'm burned out inside. Clasping the bottle, he looked at Countess Jutta. She had opened the leather case and was filling a syringe with clear liquid from a small glass phial. Her eyes gleamed and her fingers shook as she performed this task, her tongue darting out over her lips now and then in pleasurable anticipation. Then she pulled up her skirt, rolled down the stocking on her right leg, stroked the pale, naked flesh lovingly with the palm of her hand, inserted the needle into her thigh

and pressed the plunger right down, with a smile of delight. She removed the needle and pressed both thumbs against the small puncture, which was hardly bleeding, wiped the few drops of blood off on the hem of her skirt, pulled up her stocking again, smoothed down her dress and leaned back against the wall, breathing deeply. Her face came to life with amazing speed, as if a magical hand had passed over it, smoothing out folds and wrinkles.

There was a noise on the stairs outside: someone cursing. "Oh, shit! Someone's thrown up on the steps." The door opened and Jim the Donkey came in.

Lingen had not yet found out why he was called Donkey. Like everyone present, Jim had his own story. Emil might look like a giant fish, René had the manners of a gentleman, it was possible that Jutta had really been married to a count, but Jim, whose real name was Johann Borbecke and who came from a small Sauerland village, was nothing like a donkey either physically or mentally. Indeed, he had left school at eighteen with excellent examination results, and gone to study mechanical engineering in Aachen. There he became involved with a girl calling herself Bibi, who gave him sexual instruction which was quite a revelation to a simple country boy. She also gave him a severe case of the clap, which cost him a whole term's studies, and drove him to alcohol to deaden his pain, shame and self-disgust.

Once he had taken to alcohol he went steadily downhill, but now and then, in moments of remorseful self-knowledge, he would say tearfully, "I'm a donkey, I'm no better than a donkey—and to think what I could have become!" He earned his living unloading trucks at a Cologne goods station, he regularly saved exactly ten percent of his wages, and when he had got thirty dollars together he would spend two of them on a bath in the municipal baths, get just drunk enough to be randy but not so drunk as to be impotent, and go to one of the brothels in the Old Town. Eventually, when his money was spent, they would throw him out into the street, he would sleep in a doorway until he had sobered up, and wake to reiterate his complaint of, "I'm a donkey!" He would crawl back to the bunker, swearing to turn over a new leaf—but next day he would be back at the goods station unloading trucks, and getting drunk in the evening.

"Christ, I'm thirsty!" said Jim. He went to one of the beer barrels, drew himself a glass, sniffed the beer and looked

accusingly at René. "Poor stuff, this!" He drank it. "Ugh—like dishwater!" He put his hand in his hip pocket and brought out a bottle of his own.

His gloomy mood lightened when two newcomers arrived, bringing with them an accordion and five girls. The mummified figures by the walls came to life, their rigid faces suddenly showing pleasure and anticipation. The Countess, lips compressed, looked at the girls crowding around René and Dr. Lingen.

"You leave him alone, do you hear me?" she shouted. "He's mine!"

"Hired out, is he?" One of the girls put her arm around Lingen's neck. "A real man at last, among all these corpses! I'll buy him off you, Countess!"

"Keep your hands off him!" yelled Jutta, rising unsteadily.

The girls laughed, their voices echoing through the concrete vaults of the bunker. Lingen thought it was a vision of hell—hell on earth, where the devils were cheap little whores, and the dead souls crawled around, dragging their bottles with them.

About three in the morning the police surrounded the St. Cecilia bunker, and four of them went down into the underworld. They were met by the smell of spirits and beer, the sound of shouting and screeching, the music of the accordion. No one there took any notice of the policemen except for René, correct as ever, who greeted them politely and explained, "I'm just giving a little party. A trifle rowdy, maybe, but we're all old friends!"

The policemen looked at the guests: figures dancing, crawling, lying on the floor or writhing in agony. A woman—the Countess—still passably good-looking, was dancing with a well-dressed man, pressing a bottle to his lips at frequent intervals.

"Stop!" yelled one of the policemen. The sound of the accordion died away on a discord, police whistles shrilled, boots came clattering down the steps and uniformed figures filled the room, tearing couples apart, forcing the occupants of the bunker to the doorway, fending off the blows of screeching women. Dr. Lingen was parted from the Countess, who hit out and was dragged away. Another policeman, experienced in dealing with alcoholics, grabbed Lingen's right arm and twisted it behind his back. Lingen screamed, writhed, and fell to his knees.

"Come on, get up!" shouted the policeman. He let go of Lingen's arm. Lingen rose, gasping. "I'm a doctor," he said, swaying on his feet. "I protest to such treatment."

The first group of drunks had been taken upstairs and loaded into a police van. There were only three officers left in the bunker with the remaining drunks, waiting till the next batch could go: a potentially dangerous situation. "Turn around and face the wall!" ordered the policeman.

"I'm a doctor!" Lingen objected again.

"Face the wall, I said!" yelled the officer.

Slowly Lingen turned, laying his forehead against the cold, damp concrete. Behind him, he heard a girl scream and the sound of material tearing. "Fuzz!" screeched the girl. "Tearing the clothes off us, you randy bastards! Think you can do what you like, just because you're in uniform! Keep your hands off!"

He heard several loud slaps, another scream, the sound of a body falling, and then another policeman's voice: "New to this, aren't you, Heinrich? That one's an old trick—tear their clothes off, fall down, then claim we assaulted 'em! Get her out of here, will you?"

The remaining drunks were escorted up to the police van. An officer with silver braid on his cap noticed Dr. Lingen; this was Inspector Schmitz's thirty-third raid on the bunkers and cellers of Cologne, and he had seen things they never taught you about at police college. He knew it all by now, and he had also acquired an eye both for the hopeless alcoholics and for those who had not yet sunk so deep into the mire. Lingen stood out immediately: the man even had a crease in his trouser legs!

"Just a moment." Schmitz caught hold of the staggering Lingen. "Name, please."

Exhausted, Lingen leaned against the policeman. "I want to go home," he said quietly.

Schmitz held him upright. "Where d'you live?"

"Got a hotel room . . . forgotten the name, somewhere on the river . . . but take me anywhere, doesn't matter, I've got money. Just the nearest hotel. My name's Lingen, I'm a doctor of medicine . . ."

Inspector Schmitz had received the latest list of wanted persons a few hours earlier, and had merely leafed through it, not having time to read it thoroughly. But he had noted the name of Lingen on the list. "Right, you come with me," he

said, propeling Lingen toward the Volkswagen waiting beside the second green police van.

Half an hour later the telephone rang in Brigitte Lingen's hotel room. It rang for five minutes, but no one answered. Brigitte was out, going around the known alcoholics' haunts of Cologne by taxi, looking for her husband, who was asleep by now in an armchair at the police headquarters.

Father Merckel paid a visit to Professor Brosius at the hospital. He refused the glass of cognac he was offered, though the smell of the alcohol was very tempting. "I have an experiment to suggest, Professor," he said. "I think you might safely discharge our friend Peter Kaul. He won't drink again."

"Don't you think that's rather a rash claim to make, Father?"

"I'm sure he won't, Professor." Merckel's tone was earnest. "He has no reason to drink now, he's cured. He has talked to Frida Milbach, the man Bollanz who was blackmailing him is powerless to do so now—he has genuinely come to his senses. I've been talking to him, and he actually cannot understand now why he used to drink."

"Yes, that's what they all say, and a few months later they're back here, incoherent wrecks."

"Well, I think we might guard against that danger by keeping Kaul on at the hospital, but not as a patient—give him a job on the staff! He's an excellent electrician, and you can always do with good electricians in a hospital."

"That would be for the board to decide, Father."

"The board has no objection to your discharging Kaul as cured."

"Oh—so you've fixed that already?" Professor Brosius laughed. "Are you setting up as an employment agency? Well, I'll think about it. Admittedly, Kaul's reason for drinking is gone, but someone who has become addicted to alcohol will go on drinking all the same, he simply has to: an alcoholic needs liquor the way our lungs need air. Everything in him cries out for it. I've come across cases where an alcoholic goes without a drop for six months, and then, for no apparent reason, drinks two bottles straight off and poisons himself. Alcoholics are untrustworthy, Father."

"Well, just try trusting Peter Kaul." Merckel realized the smell of Brosius's own glass of cognac was distracting him. He rose abruptly. I must go, he thought. Oh God, I must go before I reach across the table and pick up that bottle! God,

give me strength! When I drink at home, God, I am alone with you, and I pray as I drink. "Try it, Professor," he repeated earnestly. "I should like to introduce him to the Alcoholics Anonymous people too. He could become a member and help himself by helping others."

Father Merckel left the hospital so fast it looked as if he was hurrying to an important engagement. He almost ran—but only to the nearest pub, where he drank two glasses of schnapps and felt himself calm down. His hands stopped shaking. He folded them and looked out into the street. He still had to write his sermon for Sunday. Text: The Lord is a good shepherd. And we humans are His beloved children—we humans who are tearing each other to pieces every moment of every day, somewhere in the world. Father Merckel bought himself two bottles of vodka in the nearest liquor store. He would need them, to write that sermon.

Konrad Lingen woke from his drunken stupor in a bed he did not know, in a strange room smelling of eau de cologne, wearing a nightshirt of his own, though it was not one he had taken when he left Essen. He had obviously been bathed, he smelled of his favorite sandalwood soap, and instead of a bottle of schnapps there was a bottle of mineral water on the bedside table. Lingen sat up abruptly. A hotel room, he could see, but a good one. Two windows, with gathered net curtains, and heavy curtains over them reaching down to the parquet flooring, an Oriental rug in front of the wardrobe, comfortable chairs, two pictures on the walls, an open door leading to a bathroom. He heard steps in the bathroom—the steps of a woman wearing high heels.

Konrad put his head in his hands. Scraps of memory floated mistily through his mind. The bunker . . . Jutta . . . a girl screaming, tearing her clothes off . . . police uniforms . . . a distant voice: "Dr. Lingen, do you know this lady?"

What lady?

"How are you feeling, Konrad?" asked a soft voice.

Lingen looked up. The figure of the woman in the bathroom doorway swam before his eyes, then steadied and cleared. "Brigitte . . ."

"Yes."

"What . . . what are you doing here? Where am I?"

"In a hotel. How do you feel now?"

"What a question to ask!" He got out of bed. "What are

you doing here?" he repeated roughly. "Who let you know where I was?"

"I've been looking for you, Konrad."

"Why?"

"How can you ask that?" She came slowly closer. He thought she was smiling. He knew that smile: it was the way the nurses smiled at patients in his own clinic. Don't worry, Mr. So-and-so, you've only had a fainting fit. When all the time it was a stroke or heart attack, and the man would be paralyzed down one side for life. The sympathetic smile and the lie.

"You know I love you," said Brigitte's voice, through those smiling lips.

"Don't talk such nonsense!" he said harshly. "You can see what I've become! Leave me alone! You have enough money, you have the house, and the clinic—get someone in to run the clinic for you! What more do you want?"

"I want you, Konrad."

"I'm as good as dead, and you'd better get used to the idea."

"But you are here, and alive."

"Listen, I have a mistress!" he shouted in her face. She was standing close to him now; she had tried to touch his hair, and he flinched back, striking her hand away.

"Yes, I know," said Brigitte calmly. "Countess Jutta, they called her. I saw her. A drug addict as well as an alcoholic. I saw her groveling on her knees before the police doctor, begging for an ampoule of morphine."

"Well, isn't that enough for you?" Lingen turned his back on his wife. "I've slept with *her*! I don't belong with you and your world anymore, I belong with these living corpses, I'm happy to have discovered the pleasures of decay!"

"Why are you lying to me, Konrad?"

He swung around. She was standing just behind him, offering him a glass. He sniffed. Wine! He took it in both hands, drained it, and then flung the glass against the wall, where it crashed and broke.

"Would you like some more?" asked Brigitte calmly. "You can use my glass."

Lingen shook his head and threw himself on the bed again, allowing her to cover him up. Her calm manner left him helpless; he had lost his wish to humiliate or frighten her. He tried putting together the jigsaw puzzle of the hours he could not remember. The police, the police station, Brigitte's inquiries,

obviously leading to his being delivered to his wife, to this hotel room and her demonstration of sacrificial love. It was more than he could bear: she was seeing his collapse, seeing him with all his masks and disguises stripped away, seeing him as he had never wished to be seen. She knew the real man now.

Can there be anything more dreadful than to know another person completely?

He stared at the ceiling. The glass of wine had roused his thirst, but he controlled himself. "Go away," he said. "Leave me alone."

"No," she replied firmly.

"For God's sake, don't force me to do anything rash!"

"What could you do?"

"I might jump out of the window . . ."

"I should jump with you."

"I might kill you!"

"Do you think I should mind?"

"I could maim you for life!"

"Go ahead. You will have to bear the sight of it . . ."

"I just want you to go away!" he shouted. "I'll kick you out of the room!"

"Then I shall sit outside and wait for you to come out. I'm here with you—why are you fighting me?" She leaned over him, looking into his face. "I'm here, that's all . . . like the air, the sun, the wind, the clouds, the rain. If you go away, I'll go with you, if you drink, I'll even drink with you."

"You're painting a picture of hell!" groaned Lingen. "What about Viola?"

"I sent her home. I wanted to spare her the sight of her father looking as you did when they found you. I want her to feel sympathy for a sick man, not contempt for a weakling."

"A weakling! You all think so sensibly, logically, reasonably. It turns my stomach! Listen—for years I've only been able to operate after drinking. Did you know that?"

"No! I don't believe it."

"It's true, though. My fingers are quite numb without alcohol. Look at them!" He held up his hands. "Senseless flesh that's all; only cognac will bring their nerves to life. And after awhile one crosses a border: you're not in control of the liquor anymore, it's in control of you. And then things can happen that will destroy a whole life." He took Brigitte's face in his

hands and turned it away from him. "I've reached that stage now, and it's why you must go. I beg you to go! You must make a good life for Viola, never mind me—I'm not a living man now, I'm just a specimen preserved in alcohol . . ."

After an hour of this he realized that there was no point in talking to her. He drank another two glasses of wine, reluctantly ate some scrambled eggs and ham that she had sent up, then got dressed and went out for a walk with her. She was treating him like an invalid, and he acquiesced. He had made a plan.

He suggested a shopping expedition for that afternoon. He seemed to have recovered his usual high spirits, he was amusing and gallant, he even ordered Brigitte some flowers by phone. He kissed her, shaved carefully, mentioned a plan he had for spending the Christmas holidays at Cortina d'Ampezzo—they would go skiing, go for sleigh rides. Then they went out shopping arm in arm, like newlyweds.

Brigitte was happy. He's recovered from the shock, she thought. It was like a fever, and now it's burned itself out. The night ahead of us will be the crucial turning point—and tomorrow we'll go home.

Inside a large store, they were swamped by crowds of people. They stopped at a display of sweaters, on sale, only fifteen dollars each, guaranteed pure wool, madam, this blue really suits you, don't you think so, sir, wouldn't you say blue is really your wife's color? Yes, the latest shades, it's all pastels this season: straight from Paris, a real bargain. Or how about this red one, the roll neck will be the height of fashion next season, with a figure like hers madam can really carry off the casual look.

It was not until Brigitte turned to ask Konrad's opinion of one of the sweaters that she found she was alone. He had slipped away, disappearing among the crowds.

"I think the gentleman went over to the book department," said the salesgirl. "Will you take this one, madam?"

Brigitte nodded, dumbly.

She left the store with the bag containing the sweater under her arm, took a taxi to the hotel, paid the bill, fetched her car from the long-term parking lot at the railway station, drove on to the highway and back to Essen. She knew she would not have another such chance to come across her husband, but she also felt she had left him in a different frame of mind. He'll come back eventually of his own accord, she thought. He must

have realized he can't just throw his life away. I shall have to be patient. When you truly love someone you learn generosity; you must be able to say, "I understand," and mean it.

Ward 70, Wing 3, had a complement of patients who had nearly all been recently admitted; they were sitting waiting to hear the Alcoholics Anonymous lectures, and they were stark naked: it was their way of making a protest. Judo Fritz's yell of, "For God's sake, the prof will be here any minute!" merely evoked a faint grin from the naked men.

To the surprise of Professor Brosius and his senior consultant, Dr. Schwenker, the AA lecturers did not bat an eyelash at the sight of their naked audience. They seemed quite unaware of the evidence of human deformity and decay seated there before them. The first speaker began with the routine sentence introducing any such talk, whether in New York or Tokyo, Montreal or Singapore, Essen or London, Munich or San Francisco, Paris or Rio de Janeiro: "My name is Wilhelm T., and I am an alcoholic." This did get a reaction from his hearers. One of them shouted, "Cheers!" and another commented, "Pity you didn't bring your bottle along!"

"You will come to hate the bottle as much as I do now," said the speaker calmly. "Any of you can leave the room, of course, but I should like those who stay to hear my story. I used to be a well-known doctor—"

Professor Brosius started, glancing at his own colleague. They both looked at the speaker with interest. He was a gray-haired man of medium height, with an intellectual face, and several deep lines around the mouth which betrayed the suffering he had overcome. Wilhelm T. went on, and none of the naked patients stood up to leave.

After the lecture, Professor Brosius waited for the speaker Wilhelm T. in the corridor, and asked for a word with him. "So you're a professional colleague of ours?" He was careful to keep any tone of disparagement out of his voice. "Or was that just an invention?"

"I *was* a professional colleague of yours, Professor." Wilhelm T. nodded. "I work in the pharmaceutical industry now, I'm head of a department. I didn't invent anything I told your patients just now, but you're not so wide off the mark—I did leave something out. While I was still drinking I performed a hundred and seventeen illegal abortions, and I was struck off the register. I shall never be able to practice again. However,

I'm still glad to have found my way back to a normal life."

That evening four of the alcoholics from Ward 70 came to see Professor Brosius, asking to be transferred somewhere they could rehabilitate themselves by work, and swearing they would never drink again. Brosius wondered what mysterious power lay in the words, "I am an alcoholic." They seemed to act like a magnet on the mass of human debris, drawing out those still capable of being cured.

Peter's discharge from the hospital was almost as much a routine affair as his admission. Judo Fritz came into his room with the familiar cry of, "Time to wake up!" and added, "Get your things packed, Peter, you're leaving today."

"Leaving?" Kaul sat up in bed. "You mean I've got a different room?"

"That's it! With your own nice soft double bed, and someone even softer beside you!"

"Come off it, Fritz!"

"Well, I don't know! Here I am with good news, and you don't believe it! Come on, get dressed and bathed and have a shave. Susanne's coming for you at ten."

Kaul stared at Judo Fritz as he left the room, whistling. Ten o'clock, he thought. He went hot and cold by turns. Discharged! No, it must be somebody's idea of a joke. They didn't just let you out of an institution these days without tests, and forms to be filled out, permits and reports. However, he tried to believe it. He washed and shaved, and dressed in the clothes Judo Fritz brought him. His own clothes: a proper shirt, tie, his gray trousers, his sport jacket, his Italian shoes, even his penknife and change for a bus fare. Discharged! He left his breakfast untouched, it was impossible to chew or swallow. He paced up and down the room, still half expecting Fritz to come in and say gleefully, "You really fell for that one, didn't you?" Or one of the doctors, maybe even the professor himself, to say, "I'm afraid it was a mistake, Mr. Kaul. There's a patient here called Kuhl, and Fritz got the names mixed up."

Quarter of an hour to go. He stood at the window, looking out.

And here came Susanne, crossing the forecourt, with Heinz and Petra beside her, flowers in their little hands.

Peter sank into a chair by the window. He was crying.

It was true! He was really being discharged.

Free, he thought, free! I'm a human being again!

Judo Fritz came back into the room, the huge face beaming with pleasure. "Ready, Peter?"

Kaul nodded. And suddenly he was almost afraid of his freedom.

10

Susanne and the children were standing down in the reception area. When they saw Peter on the stairs, Heinz and Petra let go of Susanne's hands and ran to meet him.

"Daddy!" they shouted, their clear young voices ringing through the big hall. "Daddy, we've come to fetch you! You're coming home, Daddy!"

Peter spread out his arms, picked up his children, hugged them—and found he was crying like a child himself, sobs shaking his body. "It's all right..." he stammered, realizing that Heinz and Petra were staring at him in alarm. They had seen their father drunk, happy, angry, shouting, laughing, violent or tender, but they had never thought fathers could cry at all.

"I'm back!" shouted Peter so suddenly that the children jumped—but they laughed again. It was their familiar Daddy all right!

"Mummy, he's just the same as before!" Heinz shouted down the stairs.

Susanne smiled quietly, thinking: heaven forbid! Unless he's the same as he was a very long time before, when he and I went walking in the meadows by the Ruhr and he told me he loved me, he wasn't just after the one thing, he wanted to marry me. "Peter!" she said, putting out both arms to him as he came down the last few stairs. "What a wonderful day! We're going straight home!"

He kissed her, shyly but passionately. He was ashamed to kiss her as he would have liked to in front of the children, with

Judo Fritz coming downstairs, and doctors and nurses passing through the hall.

"We've got everything ready at home, Peter—all your favorite things to eat. Roast pork and dumplings, gooseberry compote . . ."

"Susi . . ." He leaned his head against her shoulder, closing his eyes. "They say there aren't such things as angels now, but it isn't true!"

Night came: the first night at home, which he had been half dreading. The children were asleep, their faces relaxed and happy. Peter's arm lay under Susanne's neck, their faces were close together and their bodies just touching, so that they could feel one another's warmth, sensing the desire that surrounded them like an electric force.

"Suppose . . . suppose the baby's like Gundi?" asked Kaul, his throat dry.

Susanne put her hand over his mouth. "Don't talk about it, Peter. There's plenty of time yet . . ."

"We must face facts, Susi."

"No . . . let me dream!" Her head moved, her lips were against his throat. "I do love you," she said very quietly. "You remember how it was long ago, in that little attic room you had . . ."

He nodded. A shiver of desire ran through him, yet he dared not reach out his hands for her smooth, warm body. The window was open, letting chilly night air into the room, and a frosty, smoky smell. "I'll get up and shut the window," he said uncertainly.

"No, don't!" She snuggled her head closer to him, and her warmth crept over him. "I'm not cold."

"Susi," he said hoarsely. "Oh, God, I've dreamed of tonight so long! I . . . I . . ." He put his arms around her, pulling her close. "I promise you, I swear with all my heart, I'll be a different man!"

"You already are, Peter." Her hair brushed his face, and her tenderness swept away the last of his self-imposed inhibitions.

Outside the open window, the first snow of winter was falling soundlessly.

Three days later the Kauls sat in the office of the appointments officer of the State Mental Hospital Board. He knew

nothing about Peter or his history; his concern was not with the hospital's inmates, but the amount of public money they swallowed up, which was enormous. He came straight to the point with impersonal precision.

"Yes, I've had a request from the board to offer a post as electrician to one Peter Kaul; I take it that's you. Can I have your identity card, other papers, birth certificate, tax coding form, reference from your last position—the Marsellus works here in Essen, wasn't it, yes! I gather the professor already knows you; well, that's fine, you can start tomorrow, please report to the stockroom in the building around the corner, you'll find it quite easily. Work starts at seven, you know the details as regards pay, I'll keep your papers here, very glad to have you working for us!" Here the appointments officer finally looked up, nodded at Susanne, and said, in a sudden access of unofficial goodwill, "Always glad to get good workers! Good day, Mrs. Kaul, good day, Mr. Kaul!"

Pleasant, obliging sort of fellow, thought the appointments officer as the door closed. Not the sort who interrupts all the time asking pointless questions, like so many of them. I guess we've got a good man there, thought the appointments officer, finding a can of beer in his desk.

It was about now Susanne remembered she still had a promise to keep. She told Peter the whole story of the day she had bargained with Father Merckel, pleading with him to get her husband out, and then she would let Gundula go to a special clinic. Peter was home now, and she must keep her part of the promise.

At first Kaul objected strongly. "Gundi's staying here!" he protested. "And anyway, I don't believe she's . . . she's quite such an idiot after all." He had difficulty saying the word 'idiot.' "I know Dr. Lingen said so, but I'd like her examined by someone else too—maybe I'll go and see Dr. Lingen myself."

"Dr. Lingen's been away for several weeks, doing some kind of research, I don't know what. Father Merckel told me." Susanne laid her hand on Peter's arm. "Oh, Peter, look at Gundi, just compare her with other children of her age! It was weeks before I could believe it, and still I can hardly take it in, but it *would* be better for her to go somewhere she could get special treatment."

"Where?"

"I don't know, but Father Merckel says there are several clinics."

And so, a few days after Peter's discharge, he and Father Merckel were sitting together in the priest's study again. It smelled of schnapps, and Kaul realized that Merckel's eyes, fixed and shining, their pupils dilated, were those of an alcoholic on the verge of collapse. Peter knew that state; he had walked the tightrope of euphoria often enough himself, only to fall into the darkness of intoxication. He sat down hesitantly, seeing a bottle under the table, partly hidden by the folds of the voluminous tablecloth. It was half empty.

"What is it, my son?" asked Father Merckel. "I'm delighted, I may say, at the speed of your recovery! A miracle, if such things can still be said to exist. They usually expect a cure to take at least seven months. I suppose I might offer you a schnapps just to see how you'd react . . ."

"I should refuse it, Father." Kaul's voice was husky. My God, he thought, how long will everyone be so blind to the fact that their priest is an alcoholic himself?

Merckel was standing in front of Kaul, looking down on him. A smile passed over his furrowed, massive features. "You saw my bottle under the table?"

"Yes, Father."

"I have a funeral to conduct tomorrow. A high-ranking army officer, died in his bed, though he would have wished to die a hero's death in battle . . . well, Peter, I have to give the funeral address. I have to speak about the life of a man who spent his life rattling a saber. First he fought for the Kaiser, then for Hitler, later, of course, by the time he was eighty-nine, he held that democracy was the only possible form of government for a free, peace-loving Germany. Now, my friend, what am I to say at the graveside of such a man? Was he a military hero or a war criminal? A patriot or a murderer of German youth? A stalwart defender of our liberties against the East, or a man without regard for the whole of humanity? I could choose from quite a large vocabulary, and I have to find the right words! I *need* a drink, to keep me from submerging in the choice of possibilities!" Father Merckel sat beside Kaul, picked up the bottle from under the table and poured schnapps into a tall, slender glass. He tossed it back. Kaul watched without emotion, without any sense of thirst for alcohol at all. I've gotten over it, he thought. I really have gotten over it! But suddenly

Peter understood Father Merckel better, and realized that the priest did have his own reasons for drinking. The most terrible thing of all, Kaul saw, was that he had no one to help him; not even God. Father Merckel was alone in the world with himself and his bottle.

Later, they returned to the reason for Kaul's visit. "Little Gundula, yes," said Merckel. "I've been keeping my ear to the ground, and I hear there's a very good place in Switzerland."

"So far away? Whereabouts in Switzerland?" asked Kaul slowly.

"In the south. Ticino." Father Merckel rose and made his way over to his desk, searched through a heap of papers and finally produced a letter. "The Clinica Santa Barbara, run by Dr. Giulio Torgazzi, a famous authority. As you know, there is no chance of a complete cure, but there *is* a chance of Gundula's living a fulfilling life. Or do you want her to be lying on her back playing with colored blocks when she's twenty?"

"For God's sake, no, Father!" cried Kaul.

"Well, shall we send Gundi to Santa Barbara, then?"

"For... for how long?"

"I don't know. It could be years."

"But who would pay?"

"The Church, my son."

"You mean yourself!" Kaul stood up. "But if... forgive me, Father, but we all have to die someday..."

"I'm quite well off, Peter. I have inherited property from two aunts and a nephew, and I've added a clause to my will to the effect that Gundula is to be supported from my estate during her natural life."

There was complete silence between the two men for a while. Then Kaul asked, scarcely audibly, "But why are you doing this for me, Father?"

"Because you're an alcoholic as well!" The answer was clear and loud, like the crack of a whip. "I want to make *one* alcoholic happy again, especially because I... well, who knows, perhaps someday God may chalk up this very small act on the credit side of my account when I go to His peace."

Peter left the rectory feeling shattered and speechless.

It was snowing in Cologne too. The snow did not settle in the city center, but turned to dirty slush and was swept into

the gutters. It was nearly Christmas; business was brisk in the stores, and the cash register bells were ringing merrily.

Just before Christmas, Jim the Donkey died, quite suddenly and in a fitting manner, while drinking, the mouth of a vermouth bottle between his lips. He was lying on his back, and it was not until the sweet, sticky wine began running over his neck instead of down his throat that the others noticed anything wrong. They shook Jim, and he rolled over, his big, injured child's eyes glazed. Then they realized he was dead. They picked him up and carried him to another room in the bunker, laid him on a camp bed and put an old dishcloth over his face. They decided it would be a good idea to get the doctor, and have his death properly registered, since Jim the Donkey had been one of the few of them who occasionally went to church. So four of his companions went off in search of Dr. Lingen.

Lingen had gone ever more rapidly downhill during these last few weeks, since he slipped away from Brigitte in the store. He had not gone straight back to the bunker, but had found somewhere to hide in an alley by the Rhine, buying himself the right to sleep behind a curtain in a prostitute's room for one hundred dollars, on condition he kept quiet and did not disturb her at her business. He gave his word, stocked up with several bottles, got drunk and slept like a log. In his few waking moments he heard his hostess at work on the other side of the curtain—once there was a disagreement over money culminating in a screech and several unprintable expressions—then he drifted off again. He spent three days like this.

On the fourth day he decided he was safe. The girl was glad enough to get rid of him, though she felt a bit sorry for a drunk who spoke in such an educated way in his few lucid moments, and behaved like a real gentleman. "You can come back if you're really stuck for a place to go," she told him.

"Thanks." Lingen nodded, put his hands in his coat pockets, turned up his collar and marched off through the slush, down to the Rhine.

Brigitte had made no further inquiries about her husband after he escaped her in the store. It was not just that she felt ashamed to face the police; she realized that Konrad would keep running as long as his strange sickness lasted. She had heard so much from Konrad himself on the psychology of alcoholics that, now he was one of them himself, she knew he was lost to her. It had been a big decision to leave Cologne and return to Essen, one that marked the start of a new period

of her life. She had three main tasks: she had to keep the Lingen Clinic, Konrad's own achievement, going; she had to keep Viola's love and respect for her father alive; and she had to sustain her own hope that some day Konrad would find his own way back to her.

Lingen's senior surgeon had taken over the day-to-day running of the clinic, and she gave power of attorney to a lawyer friend. She told people that Konrad had gone abroad to help set up a clinic in Southeast Asia, and would be away for some time. His patients believed this story; his colleagues doubted it, and Professor Brosius smiled, but even he knew nothing for certain. His former patient Karin von Putthausen had run away, and died later: tragic, but not unusual in a brain-damaged patient. She had not caused any trouble, she had died in her father's house. Everything had been kept quiet. The question remained, had Karin really been pregnant, as she claimed, or was it a hysterical pregnancy? And if it was a real one, who could the father be? Brosius could only be thankful that this particular complication had died with Karin. Imagine a girl, a private patient in the strictly segregated women's section of his hospital, becoming pregnant!

It was this retrospectively nerveracking thought that sent Professor Brosius to visit his rival's wife and offer any help he could give, making it clear at the same time that he did not believe a word of the story about the trip abroad.

"My husband will be back within a few weeks," said Brigitte politely, and quite calmly. "I'm most grateful to you, Professor, and if I need help I shall certainly accept your kind offer." Brosius bowed, clicked his heels, kissed her hand and left, feeling considerable admiration for this strong and beautiful woman.

Meanwhile, Lingen himself was quite untroubled by the world he had left behind, with its etiquette and its necessary white lies. He had stripped himself of the morality of conventional society. He could never quite remember how he found himself back in the bunker—whether they had found him down by the Rhine or whether he made his own instinctive way back. But suddenly there he was, stumbling down the cellar steps to be warmly greeted by the bunker's inmates. Countess Jutta tore off all her clothes and danced around naked like a ghost composed of bones and sinews, skin and hair . . . well, he was back, and the company of down-and-outs all agreed they must keep a better eye on their doctor henceforth.

And now Jim the Donkey was lying on a camp bed, unable to feel pleasure or pain anymore. When they fetched him, Lingen removed the dishcloth from Jim's face and examined him. "Dead of liquor, naturally," he said briefly.

"He was a real friend," said René the Gent, with respect. The Countess giggled foolishly, like a young girl having her thigh tickled, and leaned against Lingen's back, licking his neck. He allowed her to do so as he bent over the corpse, looking into Jim's glassy eyes. I shall lie like that some time, he thought. On a camp bed with a dirty dishcloth over my face. Dr. Konrad Lingen, the world famous brain surgeon.

As Lingen no longer had a practice, a Cologne doctor had to be found to make out Jim the Donkey's death certificate. It was discovered, for the first time, that Jim had only been forty-one; he looked every day of seventy. No relatives could be traced, so the drunks and derelicts pitched in together to buy him a beechwood coffin, a grave in Cologne's Melaten cemetery, and a funeral service to be conducted by a pastor in the cemetery chapel. It took place on a Friday morning, in wind and driving snow. The pastor was miserably cold, and the mourners might have come from the frozen circle of hell. They were led by Emil the Fish, proudly carrying a banner especially made for the occasion: a white cotton bedspread bearing the symbol of a bottle on it, in red (it had been cut from an old petticoat of the Countess's). René the Gent followed the coffin in dignified silence, very correct in black, with top hat and umbrella. Dr. Lingen walked on the pastor's other side. He felt ill. He wanted a drink, but he could not have one till Jim was duly buried. Like the rest of the procession of mourners, he had a bottle in either pocket of his overcoat, and they gurgled at every step he took.

There were a few curious onlookers at the graveside, the kind of people who would come to stare at any funeral. And, oddly enough, there were three uniformed policemen, a fact which made René frown even more deeply than before. There were also three men sharing two umbrellas, two wearing duffel coats and one a leather jacket. Any German citizen, however stupid, would have known them at once for plainclothes detectives.

The pastor, being extremely cold, recited the funeral service rapidly. He described Jim as a human being in particular need of God's grace, blessed the coffin and the mourners, said a prayer, sprinkled three shovelfuls of sand on the coffin lid, and

hurried off, snow gathering inside his collar.

Then it was René's turn. He made a speech about good comradeship, years of friendship passed together, the philosophy of freedom, the consistency of Jim's life and death, with the bottle to his mouth. Countess Jutta sobbed out loud, like a respectable widow, and Lingen supported her as she, too, threw three shovelfuls of sand on the coffin and said goodbye to Jim.

And then, to the amazement of the casual onlookers, the company of alcoholics got into formation, stumbling around the open grave, surrounded it, put their hands into their pockets and simultaneously brought out their bottles. It was a salute of honor. They raised the bottles to their mouths and drank in unison, in a last farewell to Jim. Even René the Gent and Dr. Lingen stood by the graveside drinking straight from their bottles, the Countess between them.

"Right," said Detective Inspector Bergebracht of the vice squad, standing outside the circle of tippling mourners, to his men. "Break it up now. Are the cars ready?"

"Yes, sir. Waiting at Gate Five."

"Good. Make it snappy, bring the whole lot in. We'll never get them all together like this again!"

Jim the Donkey's funeral ended with a free ride to the police station in green vans.

Dr. Lingen was singled out at once. His wife Brigitte was sitting in a waiting room, and she jumped up as her husband staggered through the doorway. She had come from Essen two hours before, when the police were tipped off about the impending funeral and called her. "If there's any chance of tracing your husband again, this is it," Bergebracht had told her over the phone. She had driven straight to Cologne.

He recognized her, and stepped back. "Konrad," she said quietly, "you know I wouldn't force you . . . please! You know best what you're doing. But if you will come with me, the car's outside, and we can go now."

Lingen leaned against the wall. His suit was wet with snow, his hair straggled over his forehead, and the alcohol in his brain conjured up misty spheres and circles of smoke. He saw Brigitte hovering on a cloud like an angel, light as a feather. Difficult, that, he thought. Overcoming the force of gravity. My wife's a genius.

"Shall we go, Konrad?" Brigitte asked again.

He nodded. "Yes. Go . . . let's go home . . ." He stag-

gered, clutching at Brigitte for support, and laid his face on her shoulder. "Home . . ." he muttered. "A bed . . . a soft bed. I'm freezing—God, I'm so cold!" He was, indeed, shivering, and his teeth chattered.

Slowly, Brigitte Lingen led her husband out to the car.

11

One day near Christmas there was an accident. Father Hans Merckel was crossing the road when he suddenly stopped, looked around him empty-eyed, and collapsed. An oncoming car was just able to avoid him, and the cars behind it screeched to a halt. As Father Merckel was in his vestments, since he had just come from administering extreme unction to a parishioner, his collapse attracted a considerable crowd. The two servers who were with him, boys of fourteen, stood there stunned in their lace-edged cassocks, and then followed the two sturdy men who lifted Merckel's heavy body and carried it into the nearest shop.

Merckel did not come around until he was being examined in the hospital. He looked up at the bright light above him, closed his eyes again quickly, and pushed away the doctor's hand. "I can tell you what's wrong with me, doctor!" he said, quite distinctly. So this is it, he was thinking—Lord, how much longer have you left me? "I have cirrhosis of the liver," he said. "You needn't try to pretend there's any help for me. I'm an alcoholic."

He raised his head, and saw the face of a young man in a white coat. Father Merckel smiled, weakly, and sank back again. An examination room, he thought. I'm in a hospital. I know that young fellow too—what's his name? Oh yes: Dr. Franz Budrich. He got married just four months ago, I took the service, I preached on love, God's most beautiful gift to the human spirit. And now here I am in the hospital, helpless before Dr. Budrich, and he knows his priest is a hopeless alcoholic.

"Keep still, Father," said a voice, apparently from very far away. "Just at the moment what you need is complete rest."

Getting his eyes open again with difficulty, Father Merckel saw Dr. Budrich beside him, and two nursing nuns to one side of the room in flowing white robes, their voices low. This was a world wrapped in cotton wool . . . then he caught the smell . . . ether, alcohol, what kind of alcohol he did not know, but the smell of it was enough to arouse a burning thirst in him. With a groan, he propped himself up on his elbow again.

Dr. Budrich tried to make him lie down again, but Father Merckel pushed his hand aside. "Tell your other patients lies, doctor, don't lie to me! I've told myself so many lies you could never hope to compete!" He sat up, swinging his sturdy legs off the high examination table. "Yes, your priest is an alcoholic; that puts the good sisters into a twitter, doesn't it?" He slid carefully off the high couch, feeling strength enough to stand return to his legs; he smiled and raised a hand to the chalk-faced nuns. "Cirrhosis of the liver," repeated Father Merckel out loud. "Sentence of death—correct, doctor?"

"Look, the first thing to do is get you to your room, put you to bed," said Dr. Budrich, glancing surreptitiously at the clock above the washbasin. The senior physician should be along any moment now, it was just a matter of keeping Father Merckel here till he turned up. But the priest shook his bear-like head.

"Bed, Dr. Budrich? I suppose I can collapse for once if I feel like it? You mind your own business and I'll mind mine! I promise you I'll take care to collapse within my own four walls in the future, and not hold up the traffic."

"Father, I can't be responsible . . ."

Father Merckel smiled. "We all bear the responsibility for ourselves before God." The pungent smell of ether and alcohol was tormenting him. "I'm leaving, doctor, and it is entirely my own responsibility, so you can set your medical conscience at rest. Come to church on Sunday, doctor, and hear me preach on the failings of humanity. After every sermon I preach, I am amazed God does not strike me down, but lets me leave the church alive. I think He must love me in spite of everything . . ."

No one could actually prevent Father Merckel from leaving the hospital. The senior physician arrived ten minutes too late, listened to Dr. Budrich's story and shrugged his shoulders. "Arguing with him would be no use. That kind die on their

feet. From your examination of him, how long do you think he'll last?"

"Weeks, months . . . you never know. But there's no saving him now."

Dr. Lingen was back in his own house, but not for long. He slept for two full days. Brigitte washed and shaved him, a doctor friend who specialized in internal disorders examined him, and on the third day the district medical officer of health called. After many polite preliminaries, he got onto the subject of his duty to the welfare of the community in general, and that of Dr. Lingen in particular, and made it clear that he would have to go to an institution to be dried out—not that he put it so bluntly, wrapping his meaning up in the phrase "a course of treatment." But Brigitte understood him perfectly.

"It is quite out of the question for my husband to be sent to the alcoholics' wing of the State Mental Hospital," she said stiffly. "I don't mean because Professor Brosius runs it, but because of the other patients; my husband wrote psychiatric reports on many of them some months ago, as the courts' expert witness."

"Expert witness—precisely!" The medical officer of health was looking very concerned. "If I may say so, it's in all our interests to hush your husband's illness up. We don't want the validity of all expert opinions given in court disputed—it would create a legal precedent . . ."

"My husband always made his reports in full possession of his mental powers. His operations were famous, his—his collapse was sudden and quite unexpected, a complete mystery!"

The medical officer of health nodded, although his own information was different, and even if it came from Professor Brosius it appeared to be unbiased. According to the professor, Dr. Lingen had been showing remarkable personality changes for the last two years, and was thought to have been taking some kind of stimulant before important operations. It was clear now that alcohol was involved.

"Well, naturally, it would be question of a private institution," he said, rising to his feet. "A clinic in a secluded spot, with specially selected patients. Have you heard of Schloss Bornfeld? A mansion, indeed a small castle, out in the country, among woods and lakes, with horses to ride, tennis courts, a small golf course. It's run by Deacon Hermann Heigel, a qual-

ified psychologist. He's a great believer in the therapeutic value of a pleasant social atmosphere and of outdoor work. Of course, it isn't cheap, but luckily that's not a problem that need worry you. I suggest we visit Schloss Bornfeld within the next few days."

Contrary to their fears, Dr. Lingen did not object when, three days later, the medical officer of health and Brigitte accompanied him to the car waiting outside his house. His manner was charming and pleasant, he was talking entertainingly in the way which used to win him so many hearts. The medical officer of health glanced at Brigitte. She nodded to him. Yes, said her nod, I did give him a drink this morning. Only one. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, shivering as if he had malaria. He couldn't walk. He looked at me like a man going to his execution and begged for a drink, just a small drink . . .

Brigitte had poured a tall glass and given it to him. He had drunk it all, he had to hold it in both his shaking hands, but after the second sip he was much calmer, his breathing became more regular, and when he had emptied the glass he jumped up, eyes shining and youthful, kissed Brigitte on the forehead and cried, "How white the snow is! Brigitte, what we need is a vacation. In Cortina or Davos. I should really enjoy some skiing!"

It was not until the buildings around Schloss Bornfeld came in sight, the castle itself towering above them like some piece of elaborate confectionery among the silent woods, that Dr. Lingen fell silent, leaning back in his seat. "Do you think there's any point in it?" he asked suddenly. "I've had over ten years' experience with alcoholics, and I've always wondered: in their position, would I be able to give up the addiction?"

The other man put his hand on Lingen's arm. "What is it that drives you to drink?"

"There was once a real reason for it—but that's gone now, and I'm left with the habit. Addiction becomes the basis of an alcoholic's life."

Karin, thought Lingen, as they drove into the castle courtyard. She brought out my alter ego, my real self. And if it had not been Karin, it would have been some other girl. At some point we all stumble across our inevitable fate. I should be thankful to her, I suppose: narrow-hipped, lustful, blonde Karin. She freed me from the cage of morality and ethics. The

world outside may condemn me, but I can say: look, here is a real uninhibited human being—the most dangerous animal of God's creation!

Deacon Hermann Weigel was still a young man, with mild features and a mild voice. He came out to meet them. "Welcome to Schloss Bornfeld!" he said to Lingen, giving him both hands, and adding, "I think you will like it here."

Lingen said nothing. He looked around him. Woods, snow-covered fields, bushes, a lake, a few fences and a private road, the gray sky meeting the earth, distance and solitude. A prison whose only bars were the vault of the sky.

"Our other guests are having lunch. If you'd care to join us . . ."

Lingen shook his head. "I'd like to be alone. Would you show me my room?"

Half an hour later the medical officer of health and Brigitte were driving away from Schloss Bornfeld again. Konrad sat at the window of his room: a pleasant, light room, with modern furniture and a view of the snow-covered park. He did not meet the other guests until evening, when they gathered around the wide fireplace of the great hall. Beech logs were burning on the hearth, they were drinking fruit juice and smoking, and the firelight flickered on their faces.

"Gentlemen," said Deacon Weigel, "may I introduce our new guest? Dr. Konrad Lingen, the brain surgeon."

Four men in dinner jackets rose from leather chairs by the fire. Other guests got to their feet too, in the shadowy corners of the great room. There were a number of striking faces there: lined or furrowed, heavy-jowled or fine-boned, old or quite well-preserved. Dr. Lingen's heart leaped in recognition. My friends from the bunker, he thought, but in evening dress and still constrained by their upbringing!

"Von Hammerfels, presiding judge of the regional court."

"Dr. Franz Wiggert, the economist . . ."

"Professor Heitzner, the sinologist . . ."

"Ewald Hoppnatz, the brewery owner." A pink, pig-like face, quick, bright eyes, broken veins on the cheeks, a polished bald head and bitten fingernails.

"A glass of tomato juice?" the sinologist, Professor Heitzner, asked.

Dr. Lingen shook his head. Oh, my friends of the bunker, he thought, how I envy you. You have no need to pretend;

what do rats know of the difference between truth and lies? And he sat down by the fire.

There would be some delay before the Clinica Santa Barbara had a place free for Gundula, and the fact that she need not go just yet meant that Peter was enjoying his new job all the more. He worked an eight-hour day at the hospital, then went on to Judo Fritz's bungalow, where he was helping decorate the interior and tile the bathroom. The one temptation he had to contend with at the moment was not alcohol, but Fritz's attractive ex-barmaid wife Lucie. She seemed to be taking a great interest in the progress of work on the bungalow, and whenever Fritz was on duty she would come and hang around Peter, telling him how horrible it was, never going to bed with anyone but a gorilla.

"I suppose he's all right, old Fritz," she said. "Heart of gold, and all that, but just look at his hands, will you? When I feel them on me—ugh! Makes me feel quite ill. And when he comes he snorts—snorts like a horse with a stuffy nose! Christ, it really turns me off. Mind you, when I married him I had TB, thought I'd never be healthy again. I needed someone to look after me, and Fritz does have a good job. But now . . ." She leaned against the newly tiled bathroom wall and looked at Peter under her eyelashes. "Bet you don't snort! What's the matter with you, aren't I your type, or what?"

"You're my friend's wife, Lucie," said Kaul, spreading tile adhesive on the wall.

"Here, I'll give you a bottle of gin too!"

Kaul smiled faintly. A bottle of gin! The mere idea made him feel sick.

"Can't you get it up, then?" Lucie taunted him. "Left it behind in the hospital, did you?"

But after that she left Kaul alone, and found a plumber for her lover instead. It took him three full weeks to fit the guttering.

One evening the Kauls had visitors. There was a concert on television, and they were particularly enjoying it because Kaul had just paid the last installment on the television set. It was their own now. And once they had paid off Susanne's sewing machine, the refrigerator and the central heating, they would be free of debt for the first time in three years. They were sitting hand in hand, like happy children, when the doorbell rang. Two men stood outside the apartment, and Susanne

felt alarmed—could they be officials from some kind of authority again? "Yes?" she said hesitantly. "What is it?"

"Could we have a word with your husband?" asked one of them, raising his hat.

Susanne was reassured. Officials from the authorities did not raise their hats. She stepped aside, showing them into the hall.

"Dr. Heinrich," one of them introduced himself. The other man even bowed to Susanne. "My name is Bonnemann."

"I'm not sure . . ." Susanne looked at the living room doorway. Peter came out in his slippers, shirt open at the neck, the picture of a contented citizen relaxing after his day's work.

"Good evening, Mr. Kaul," said Dr. Heinrich. "It's just possible you may remember meeting us at the State Mental Hospital." He smiled reassuringly at the flicker of alarm that showed in Kaul's eyes at the mention of the place. "We came to give a talk, do you remember? We're members of Alcoholics Anonymous, people who, like yourself, have found our way back to normal life. To make a long story short, we wondered if you would care to join our society and help other alcoholics?"

It turned into a long and sociable evening. The three men talked as only those who have shared the same experience can do, and Peter agreed to lecture once a month as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

"Why not come with us next month?" said Mr. Bonnemann, who turned out to be a prosperous company director. "We're going to Schloss Bornfeld."

"Schloss Bornfeld? Where's that?" asked Peter.

"It's what they call an open institution, where no one is detained against his will—and a very high-class establishment!" Dr. Heinrich looked concerned. "And a tricky proposition. There's no one harder to convince than an alcoholic who's a member of the intelligentsia. That's why we'd like you, as a working man, to talk to them."

"But mine is such an ordinary story," Peter ventured to object.

"Exactly." Mr. Bonnemann clapped him on the shoulder. "Contemplating a fate one wouldn't care to suffer oneself can be particularly therapeutic."

Countess Jutta had collapsed like a crumbling wall. The police had let her go three hours after Jim the Donkey's funeral and the raid on the cemetery: she could prove she had a fixed

address, she received welfare benefit to live on, so there was no legal reason to hold her. They let René the Gent go too; he even had a license to operate as an itinerant trader. However, Emil the Fish was sent to Lingelputz Prison. There was a warrant out for him already on a charge of public nuisance, namely, urinating into the river Rhine in broad daylight.

Countess Jutta took up her post outside the police station, waiting for Dr. Lingen. She knew he had been singled out from the rest and taken to another room, but it couldn't be for long. They had no right to hold him, either. She waited patiently for three or four hours, and then began to get uneasy. René the Gent had gone off long ago, and the rest, including Emil, had been taken away in one of the green police vans, but there was still no trace of Lingen. It was odd.

When the Countess found out that her lover had left by a back way, going no one knew where, in the company of his wife, she went back to the bunker, changed into a black dress and drank four bottles of vermouth.

One Sunday morning, about ten o'clock, a fire engine was called out to the Hohenzollern Bridge. René the Gent was standing on the narrow pedestrian footpath below the bridge, wearing a tailor-made suit, his umbrella up because it was snowing. He was staring up at the tangle of iron that was the girders of the bridge, shouting at the top of his voice now and then, "Don't be a fool, Jutta! Come down!"

The scene that met the firemen's eyes was both terrifying and comic. A woman wearing a black dress and a hat with a widow's veil was perched among the iron girders, sitting astride one of the cross-pieces, and drinking from a bottle at frequent intervals. She was staring down at the Rhine and the snowflakes melting in its dirty yellow waters, taking no notice either of René the Gent or of the firemen starting to maneuver their ladders into place. The bells of the cathedral and Great St. Martin's were ringing for Sunday service; trains thundered by, making the bridge sway and quiver. A crowd collected, and was kept back by the crew of a police car.

"You know her?" the police sergeant asked René the Gent.

He nodded. "It's the Countess."

"The what?"

"She's a real Countess. She wants to jump in the Rhine."

"What for? Some kind of tragedy?"

"Not exactly." René looked up. Jutta was drinking from her

bottle again, trying to warm herself. The Rhine would be cold, and she had always hated the cold. "She's had enough, that's all. She's tried everything life can offer and now she's had enough."

The ladders were rising up to the girders of the bridge now. The Countess had risen to her feet. She stood there, swaying, and threw her empty bottle down into the river. It described a great arc as it fell, bounced on the water, and floated away on the current under the bridge.

"René!"

René closed his umbrella and looked up. "Jutta!" he shouted back.

"It's no use!" she shouted. "Even the liquor lets you down in the end!" As her body fell through the air the gaping crowd screamed, and a woman fainted. Jutta did not feel the cold, because her back was the first part of her to hit the Rhine, and the impact from that great height broke her spine and neck instantly. She did not even sink at once, but floated under the bridge until her black dress absorbed enough water to drag her down.

René the Gent opened his umbrella again, brushed the snow off his coat, and noticed with annoyance that he had gotten his gloves wet.

It was a cold, sunny morning. The guests of Schloss Bornfeld were assembled in the small, circular breakfast room. Dr. Lingen had had a bad night. He knew from his own medical experience what sudden withdrawal of alcohol was like, and even the strong sedative injection a young nurse had given him before he went to bed could not stop his craving from overcoming him.

Toward morning, bathed in sweat, he was ready to break out and run away through the snow, run anywhere, just get away. He had flung open the window, leaning out into the icy air. There were no bars to keep him in.

But he did not run. He stayed there at the window, shivering with cold, hoping he would have pneumonia by morning. However, morning came, and he did not have so much as a cold; on the contrary, despite his sleepless night he felt remarkably fresh, with a better appetite for breakfast than he had known for some time.

Ewald Hoppnatz, the brewery owner, and Dr. Wiggert, the

economist, had kept a place for him at a table for three. "How about a walk after breakfast?" asked Hoppnatz. "We could go down to the lake and over to the birch wood; our group isn't on duty at the farm today."

"On duty where?" asked Lingen, surprised.

"At the farm—supposed to be therapeutic, doctor, and it's not such a bad idea. We have seven riding horses and nine cows here, ten pigs, forty-seven hens—and a couple of roosters for the hens; myself, I call that cruelty to dumb animals! There's a limit to anyone's stamina! We take turns looking after the animals, in groups of five. I can assure you it's really most enjoyable. I never knew, for instance, that you had to wash a cow's udder before you milk her, and it's a fascinating sight, watching a sow farrow!"

"I used to ride a great deal," said Lingen thoughtfully. "Can one ride here."

"One can do just about anything except drink, doctor."

After breakfast Deacon Weigel asked to see Dr. Lingen. They sat in Weigel's office, a simple room which contrasted with the grand furnishings of the rest of the castle. "So you got through the night very well, doctor," said Deacon Weigel, offering cigarettes. "I'm glad of that. Three times in the past seven years we've had guests climb out of the window on their first night—we didn't fetch them back, no one is forced to stay. Why didn't *you* climb out, I wonder?"

Lingen lit a cigarette. "How do you know about last night, Mr. Weigel?"

"I was observing you at your open window; my room is just opposite yours."

"Oh, so you keep checking up on us here?"

"Only the first night. No one will watch you again. But you haven't answered my question, Dr. Lingen: why didn't you climb out?"

"Perhaps I was ashamed. I didn't want to be weaker than the others here."

Deacon Weigel nodded slightly. "I thought so," he said. "Well, now—I hear you like riding?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you'd like to take over the care of Oberon, our black gelding? He can be difficult at times—a fine, powerful beast, but with a will of his own. Not many people fancy riding him. Would you take him on, Dr. Lingen?"

"By all means! I've never been thrown off a horse yet."

"Well, good luck, then! Just one more thing . . ." Deacon Weigel bowed his head slightly. "I'm always here if you need me, doctor. Not as your medical adviser, but as a friend. I was an alcoholic myself."

Two weeks passed: there was work on the farm and in the outhouses, and the evenings were for relaxation. They played games, chess or billiards, bridge or snakes and ladders. Sometimes there would be talks: Dr. Wiggert gave a lecture on the economic problems of the Punjab, Professor Heitzner discussed anthropological features of the peasant communities of central China, it was all very civilized. A tenor gave a song recital; he turned out to be a well-known singer staying here under a pseudonym—or rather, under his own real name. None of the guests so much as mentioned the word alcohol, or dwelt on his own problems. But all their faces were marked with the misery one sees in the eyes of an animal which has crawled away somewhere to die.

One Sunday the guests of Schloss Bornfeld were to meet in the hall to hear a talk from some outside lecturers: three men from the AA, they were told.

"AA?" asked Ewald Hoppnatz.

"The abbreviation for Alcoholics Anonymous," Lingen told him. "It should be interesting."

"What do these people do?" asked von Hammerfels.

Dr. Lingen shrugged his shoulders. "They simply tell their own stories. They don't gloss anything over, they tell it all—what they were, what *we* are, my friends: drunks! Only with the difference that they have found their way back to normal life."

"Well, so have we!" said Hoppnatz defensively.

"You think so?" Lingen smiled ironically. "I saw you the day before yesterday, Hoppnatz, when you were sniffing that liniment for a horse's inflamed joint. The stuff has alcohol in it. The only reason you didn't eat it was that it's black and sticky!"

Two hours later, though, Lingen's composure was shattered. He was facing someone he had not expected to see.

They had recognized one another at once. "Mr. Kaul!" said Lingen quietly. "So we meet again . . ."

"Yes, doctor." Peter shook hands with Lingen; both men's fingers were trembling. "I'm pleased to have a chance to talk to you . . ."

With a sudden feeling of proud revulsion, Lingen replied,

"Well, I don't know that you will. I doubt if I shall be there to listen to you."

He turned abruptly and left the room. Peter hesitated for a moment, and then hurried after him, catching up with him in the courtyard on his way to the stables.

12

"Why are you avoiding me, Dr. Lingen?" asked Peter, keeping pace with the doctor, who was striding energetically along, head bent. "Please—don't be unfair to yourself! There's no need to feel ashamed because . . ."

Dr. Lingen stopped abruptly. "Go away, please!" he said imperiously. "I don't need you preaching to me!"

"I don't want to preach to you. I only want to talk to you about—about this thing that's happened to both of us. I swear I didn't expect to meet you here; frankly, I was amazed to see you."

Dr. Lingen walked on, opened the stable door and went inside. Kaul followed. When Lingen hoisted himself up on the big chest where the horses' feed was kept, he sat there too; they both dangled their legs, looking down at the animals. It was warm in the stable, and the ammoniac smell was soothing.

"Well, what is it you want?" asked Lingen, after a few moments' silence. "When I examined you in the hospital—not so long ago, either—you had tried to commit suicide, you were an alcoholic. And now you claim you're cured? I suppose you may believe it yourself!"

"Of course I do."

"Suppose I were to offer you a bottle now?"

"I should pour it out on the straw here."

"Very edifying!" Lingen laughed. "But you really can't expect a fellow-alcoholic to believe you!"

"Wouldn't you do the same?"

Lingen turned his head away, looking out of the rather dirty stable window. Deacon Weigel was out in the courtyard with

the other two Alcoholics Anonymous members and the economist, Dr. Wiggert. He looked back at the horses, the gelding, Oberon, whom he had not yet ridden. He had felt too weak to tackle the task. But he would do it tomorrow! Tomorrow he'd find strength to stay in the saddle. Tomorrow—a key word in a drinker's vocabulary!

"What do you want to say to me, then, Mr. Kaul?" asked Lingen, only a touch of his habitual sarcasm in his voice. He was finding it rather difficult to be sarcastic, for the sneaking thought came into his mind that this ordinary, working-class man put him to shame. I don't have the inner strength of this little nobody, he thought. I, Konrad Lingen, the great brain surgeon, am hollow inside. I could crush him with my scientific knowledge, but he'd still go one better than me: he's cured, and I am sick. But I shall recover! I'll ride Oberon and prove I am a whole man again!

"I don't want to say anything else to you, Dr. Lingen, really I don't," said Peter. "I might not have come at all if I'd known I should see you here."

"Why not?"

"I wouldn't have wanted to see you as you are now."

"Oh. And how do you see me?"

"As a man of genius fighting his own nature, just to preserve his pride."

Lingen slid down from the chest, ostentatiously turning his back on Kaul. "You have a powerful imagination," he said. "I don't think I want to talk to you either—you and your moralistic fantasies! Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, doctor."

And Kaul quietly left the stable. Looking out of the window, Lingen saw him join Deacon Weigel and Dr. Wiggert; his two companions had gone indoors. No one glanced at the stable, no one seemed to be troubling about him. He felt alone and outcast. He laid his forehead against the window pane, closing his eyes, clenched his fists and beat them against the whitewashed wall.

"I'm still human!" he shouted at the wall. "Dr. Konrad Lingen—lecturer, surgeon, medical expert, millionaire! Konrad Lingen—human being! Human being!"

He stopped shouting, exhausted, and looked at the horse Oberon, who was disturbed by the loud human voice; he had laid back both ears and was looking at Lingen with big, round, dark eyes. His flanks were trembling.

"Oberon," said Lingen, softly. "We'll go riding tomorrow."

The horse turned his head, pawing the ground restlessly, and suddenly kicked out. Lingen was just in time to jump aside. "You *are* a vicious brute; they're right!" he said, breathing heavily. "But I shall master you! And when I've ridden you, I shall be well again! You'll be the means of curing me, Oberon, you devil!"

It was not, in fact, next morning, but a day later, that Dr. Lingen did as he had promised himself and saddled the gelding Oberon. The groom was in the stables, and the horse did not resist. He merely flicked his ears, nostrils quivering and twitching, and showed his strong teeth as he champed the bit.

Deacon came into the stable and patted Oberon's neck. "He's very restive today," he commented. "No one's ridden him for four months. Of course we've had a saddle on him, but we've only led him on a rein. The last man to ride him was Mr. Zoltitz—he's a bank manager. Oberon threw him fourteen times—but the fifteenth time Zoltitz stayed on his back! He's at his desk in the bank again now."

Dr. Lingen did not reply, though he took the deacon's point well enough. He bent down and removed his spurs. Weigel raised his eyebrows. "Aren't you riding after all?"

"Yes, but I don't think I'll wear spurs."

"Oberon will never accept you as his master if you don't use spurs."

"I suppose Mr. Zoltitz did?" asked Lingen dryly.

"Yes, of course."

"I don't think much of forced obedience, caused by the infliction of pain." Lingen went up to Oberon. "Come along, boy; we shall be friends, not victor and vanquished!"

"No, wait!" Deacon barred Lingen's way. "I'm responsible for your welfare, doctor! Oberon will murder you. I can't allow it!"

"You did recommend me to ride him, Deacon."

"But not without spurs."

"Well, we simply differ as to the best methods to use." Dr. Lingen forced Oberon's head down; it took all the strength he could muster to control the horse. You lovely, strong creature, he thought; we shall get on very well. At the moment we're like gladiators, eyeing each other—but I'm not afraid.

"Move aside, would you, Deacon?" said Lingen mildly. "It's my own bones I'm risking. I'll absolve you of any responsibility."

And Deacon stood aside. Lingen led Oberon out of the yard, and the horse went with him quietly. The snow crunched under their feet, fine clouds of vapor rose from their nostrils into the cold air. Why does he keep walking Oberon? Deacon was puzzled. Why doesn't he mount?

But Lingen walked the horse for a quarter of an hour, until they had left the castle grounds and were approaching the birch wood. The frozen lake lay behind them, and the moors ahead. The sky was cloudless. Lingen stopped at the border of the wood, and animal and man faced each other. Like gladiators, Lingen thought again.

"Well, and now to ride you!" he said out loud. He let the stirrups free from the girth, put one foot in the stirrup and reached for the pommel, but he did not swing himself up directly; he waited, looking at Oberon, ready to jump free if the horse reared or swerved. However, Oberon stood still. His ears flicked, his nostrils dilated, and he showed his teeth.

He's laughing, by God! thought Lingen. If a horse can laugh, that devil of a beast is laughing!

Suddenly he was in the saddle, thighs pressed together, his second foot in the other stirrup. He sat firmly, pulling on the reins. The horse did not rear or buck, as he would have expected. He stood like a statue, immobile except for the quivering of his flanks. Then, suddenly, he shot off at a gallop, making for the wood and the thick three trunks that stood so close together, their bark gnarled and icy.

And Lingen realized what Oberon was trying to do. He pulled at the reins with all his might, forcing the bit into the horse's mouth. Oberon only galloped on. The reins were torn from Lingen's hands as the horse tossed his head, he stretched his neck and whinnied, a clear, triumphant sound cutting through the icy air . . . then they were on the very edge of the wood, and the trees, so close together, looked like the teeth of a saw.

Lingen did not hesitate. He knew Oberon intended to brush him off among the trees; his legs would be crushed, his bones broken, he would be taken back to Schloss Bornfeld crippled for life. Just before they met the trees Lingen pushed himself away and backward, out of the saddle. He rolled over twice in the snow, got to his knees and stopped there.

The horse raced on, passing between two tree trunks just wide enough apart to let his own black body through. Any rider on his back would have had both legs crushed. Lingen

rose and walked slowly on into the wood. Oberon was standing among the birches, panting and sweating, head raised, pawing the snow furiously. When he saw Lingen he let out a hoarse whinny, danced around one of the trees, and lowered his head like an angry bull.

"Want to try again?" said Lingen, taking hold of the bridle. Once again, Oberon did not move as he swung himself into the saddle and patted the horse's neck.

"What next?" he asked the animal. "Rolling over? An old trick—but it would be a waste of your time to try anything else, because I'm going to stay on your back. How about coming to an understanding, eh?"

And the silent duel between man and horse continued. Oberon would trot on, obeying the pressure of Lingen's thighs, but then his docility would turn out to be a trick; he would turn right instead of left, trot on instead of stopping in obedience to his rider. Finally he broke into a wild gallop over the moors, through bushes, over ditches, showing off his strength. Lingen only laughed out loud, leaning forward to pat the horse's sweating neck. "Go on, then!" he shouted. "Keep running—you'll tire sooner than me! Go on, use up your strength, then!"

It was a full hour before Oberon came to a halt, snorting, his legs trembling. He took another couple of steps, then lowered his head to lick snow from the grass, and Lingen dismounted and stretched his weary body. His own legs were trembling too, the insides of his thighs were sore. He walked up and down, stiffly, then leaned against the horse's steaming body and pressed his face to the saddle. "Come along, you bastard!" he gasped. "It's you or me now. I either stay lying here, or I ride into Schloss Bornfeld on your back!"

Painfully, he got back into the saddle, clenching his teeth as his sore thighs came into contact with the hard leather again. He pulled on the reins, and this time Oberon obeyed the tug at his mouth. Wearily, he turned the way his rider wanted.

"That's it... good boy," said Lingen, satisfied, clinging wearily to the pommel. "We know each other now. We shall be friends..."

Father Merckel had heard from the Clinica Santa Barbara. They had a bed free; they could take Gundula Kaul.

An obvious change had come over Father Merckel during the last few weeks. He no longer kept his drinking secret. His housekeeper could not make it out at first. She came to clean

his study one morning, when he was conducting a service, and recoiled in horror at the sight of an empty bottle on the desk, and two more, beside a flat hip flask, on the beautiful old priedieu. Well, he must have had a visitor, thought the housekeeper. She opened the window to air the room and blow away the fumes of alcohol, collected the empty bottles in a basket, and started to vacuum the carpet.

Merckel found her at this task, and pulled the plug out of the wall socket. The whine of the vacuum cleaner died away. "Leave those bottles there!" said Merckel, pointing to the basket. "I need them for statistical purposes—it'll be interesting to see how many more gallons of alcohol a liver with cirrhosis can take before it finally gives up."

"You . . . dear me, Father, do you mean you drank all that yourself?"

Merckel nodded grimly. "I have been drinking for years. Seventeen years. Surprised, are you? Well, don't let it worry you." He marched over to the old chest where he had always been accustomed to hide his bottles, got out a new one and opened it.

The housekeeper scurried out of his study, shut herself into the kitchen and burst into tears. Later, when she went shopping, she told her friends, looking very worried, that the priest was extremely ill. Some internal infection, it made him feel dizzy, even in the pulpit. She had decided she must lie to protect him; one of these days he'd be standing at the altar dead drunk, but with luck they would all put it down to his illness.

As for Merckel, he knew he had his sentence of death; his time was up, and soon he would be standing before God to give an account of himself. What would he say then? "Lord, I drank because I had a conscience. I had to preach Your love for humanity, and I saw humanity smile in mockery. I spoke of charity and forgiveness, while men slaughtered each other around me. Lord, I drank because I had a conscience!"

Since Peter's discharge from the hospital, his and Susanne's happiness had been unclouded. He would often put his ear to Susanne's belly at night as they lay in bed, listening to the baby's movements, feeling a sense of almost sacred awe at the wonder of new life. So, though they had been expecting it, it was something of a shock when they got the news that Gundula could go to Switzerland. Secretly, they had hoped there never would be a bed free, or Gundula would suddenly change for

the better, there would be such an improvement in her that they could say: No, we'll keep Gundula here. Look, Father, she's quite different now.

But no such miracle happened. Gundula was certainly developing, but only physically. Her big round head was out of proportion with her thin body. Susanne and Peter hardly noticed—parents see their children differently from outsiders—but others did, including Father Merckel, who urged them to send her to Switzerland as soon as possible.

They were ready to set out five days after news of the bed at the clinic came. Kaul had taken three days' vacation, Father Merckel, who was to accompany them, had lent them two suitcases, Heinz and Petra, who were to stay with a friend of the Kauls, cried at the idea of parting with Gundula, Susanne packed and repacked the cases four times, and when the taxi finally drove up to their building she felt faint and had to lie down.

"I can't, Peter," she said miserably. "I can't let Gundi go!"

Outside, the taxi hooted. The train would not wait for the Kaul family. Father Merckel ran upstairs to ring the bell. When they were finally in the train, Susanne kept hugging little Gundula. "If I don't like the look of the clinic I shall take her straight home," she said quietly.

"You will like it, Susanne," Merckel told her. "Don't think of yourself—think of the child. She's the one who needs help."

The Clinica Santa Barbara lay on a hill dropping steeply to Lake Maggiore. There were several long, white buildings, with a playground and a swimming pool. The Kauls had no time to admire the beauty of its surroundings, however, until after they had arrived at Locarno and driven to the clinic. Susanne had slept all the way from Zurich, while Peter nursed Gundi on his lap. Every now and then Father Merckel pointed out features of the landscape, but Kaul hardly glanced out of the window. He was thinking of Dr. Lingen and himself, and their common predicament, unable now to understand how he had let himself degenerate into such a state of alcoholic misery.

The senior pediatrician at the Clinica Santa Barbara was one Dr. Hutli, a stout, pleasant little man with a bald head fringed with hair like a tonsure, and a broad Swiss accent. Tickling Gundula's cheeks, he said. "She'll be happy here."

They were shown over the clinic. Susanne grew quieter the more they saw. There were children who hardly had faces at all, children with limbs like sausage-shaped growths, creatures

who could only crawl and babble, growing girls with babies' faces, thin little bodies with huge heads balanced at the end of long necks, beings such as Hieronymous Bosch might have painted, but these were alive, dragging themselves around, sitting at tables.

"As you can see," said Dr. Hutli gently, "your Gundi is a very mild case indeed. I've shown you all this to prove that, with the right guidance and treatment, your daughter has every chance of developing into a person who can lead a useful life."

Susanne nodded. Her legs were trembling. These are all human beings, she thought. Their mothers bore them, fed them, kissed them, had hopes and plans for them before they were born—and when they did come into the world they were called human because a human body had brought them forth, but they looked like creatures from a distant, unknown star. Horrified, Susanne laid her hands over her own swelling stomach. Not you, she thought. No, you'll be beautiful. I know you will! You'll look like your father, the only man I've ever loved.

Gundi was taken away. She did not cry, she did not seem to notice; she had her beloved wooden blocks, and they were all she needed. "You can visit her any time you like," Dr. Hutli said as they left, "but please phone first."

Susanne nodded, her throat too tight to speak. Peter had his arm around her, and that helped; it was good to know she was not on her own, the way she had been for the last couple of years. They stayed the night in Ascona, in a hotel on the lake. From their window they could see boats passing by, and in the evening they sat there, looking across the lake at the lights of the houses on the hillside opposite. There was a streak of silver moonlight on the rippling water.

"It's beautiful here," said Peter softly.

"Do you think Gundi will ever be able to realize that?" asked Susanne.

"I really do think she's in the best possible hands here," Peter said. "We have a lot to thank Father Merckel for. You must be tired," he added. "Come to bed."

"Yes, I am tired." She smiled, and pressed close to him. "But leave the window open. I like to hear the sound of the water splashing."

Down in the hotel bar, Father Merckel was sitting with a two-quart bottle of wine in front of him, steadily drinking. About midnight a waiter took him up to his room and helped him into bed.

"*Grazie tante*, my son," he muttered. "God made the vines grow—never forget that, my son!"

He folded his hands over his ample paunch and fell asleep. One more day was over, and a good deed done.

13

Konrad Lingen was walking in the grounds of Schloss Bornfeld on a cold, misty morning. He found a bench among some trees, brushed the snow off its seat, sat down and wrapped his coat tightly around him. It was only a few days since his unexpected meeting with Peter, and that meeting had started him thinking seriously about himself again. He looked back at the events of his life: they bore witness to a career rich in honors and material rewards, but short on spiritual values. He could see the essential duality of his nature only too clearly now. He had always been acting, playing a different part every day: the great surgeon, the popular man of the world, occasionally the loving husband, but more often the lover of admiring young girls or neglected wives. Those who met and looked up to Dr. Lingen knew so little of the parts he was always playing, while he himself could only recover from the strain by drinking alone in his room at night.

Even his wife Brigitte did not really know him, she had married only one part of him: the successful doctor, tender husband, loving father of Viola. But he changed his masks as necessity dictated, assuming different costumes at will—and what was left now? A drained man, sitting on a cold bench in the park of a castle which housed a collection of mummified drunks, ruined ghosts who tried to prop up their self-esteem with memories of their former titles and qualifications, yet were too rotten inside to take an independent step outside Schloss Bornfeld. And what about himself? Was there really nothing left of Konrad Lingen but his shadow?

He lowered his head, running his fingers over the wooden

slats of the bench. His fingertips felt the cold sensation of ice, but none of the roughness and unevenness of the surface details of the wood itself. Lingen clenched his teeth. There's a little lump of ice on the slat there, he thought, and over there the head of a nail is just protruding from the wood. Any ordinary man's fingers would feel them—to a surgeon, they should seem enormous. He slid his hand over the lump of ice, the head of the nail, lightly at first, then more firmly, then pressing very hard indeed. Nothing. Nothing at all! Just the cold.

Suddenly Lingen jumped to his feet. I'm dead, he thought. I may be breathing, but does breath of itself mean life? My fingertips, the vital part of me, are dead, and I shall remain a lifeless husk as long as I don't drink. And if I do drink, I become an animal! Dear God, what reason have I got for living?

But at least Brigitte had some good news to bring when she paid an unexpected visit a day or so later. Dr. Kruger, Lingen's senior surgeon at the clinic, who had just been appointed to a university lectureship, had also offered to take over the entire running of the clinic. He already had a number of patients eager for him to operate on them, since he was known to be a pupil of Lingen himself—that was recommendation enough. The clinic's fame and achievements would continue, and would still be connected with Lingen's name.

"Your husband is out riding," Deacon Weigel told Brigitte, welcoming her in. "He is doing very well, better than I expected. He really seems to be getting himself straightened out quite rapidly; I think he's getting his ambition back, and that's a crucial moment in the healing process—the patient's rediscovery of his self-confidence. He may not know it himself, but my own feeling, since he mastered the horse Oberon—and I gather it was a hard struggle!—has been that he has the best chance of any of my guests here of making a full recovery."

"Oh, thank God!" said Brigitte. "You don't know how happy that makes me." Her face had become more severe over these last few weeks, with new lines running from nose to mouth. To Konrad, his collapse had been the culmination of a long sequence of events, but it had taken Brigitte entirely by surprise. Her love had made her blind, but now she saw the truth she felt her whole life with Konrad had been based on an illusion. She lay awake at night, brooding. Why had she never noticed anything? Was she to blame? Had she taken their happy, carefree life too much for granted?

"Your husband *will* be cured, I feel certain," Deacon Weigel repeated. "Only he must not drink a drop of alcohol for some months. Not one glass—not so much as a sip. His body would react to it at once, and nothing could be worse for his morale than a relapse."

Brigitte nodded. "I'll make sure I'm always with him once he's home." She looked at her little gold wristwatch. "When will he be back?"

"He usually gets back about four, so we have half an hour to wait. Shall we take a walk in the park?"

"Yes, I'd like that, Mr. Weigel."

While the other guests at Schloss Bornfeld had their after-lunch siesta, and Weigel was strolling in the park with Brigitte, Konrad himself was riding Oberon out to a lonely farm on the moors. The farmer's family had raised sheep here since the sixteenth century, none of the younger generation wanted to move to the city either, and so the isolated farm was kept going.

Lingen had visited the thatched cottage which was the farmhouse three times before, talked to the farmer and his wife, firmly refused the offer of a drink but accepted a cup of tea, warmed himself by the tiled stove and then ridden back to Schloss Bornfeld. But when he rode up the farmhouse door again today, calling out, "Hello there! Put the kettle on!" no one appeared at either door or window, as usual. Dr. Lingen tapped one of the low windows with his riding crop. "Anybody in?" he called.

"Oh, doctor!" It was the farmer's wife, inside the cottage. "Doctor, please help me!"

Dr. Lingen jumped off the horse. The farmer's wife flung open the door and ran out, her hair hanging untidily around her wrinkled face, which was distorted with grief. She clung desperately to Lingen's hacking jacket.

"Help me, please! He's dying . . . lying in there dying!"

"Who's dying?"

"My husband! He's there in the bedroom, screaming with the pain. It's his guts, doctor, he's got a terrible pain in his belly."

Dr. Lingen pushed the woman aside and strode into the house. The farmer was lying on the tall, broad bed, hands on his stomach, staring at the ceiling and shrieking, "I'm burning! My poor guts, they're burning! Oh God, I'm dying!"

At the sight of Dr. Lingen he tried to sit up, but obviously an intolerable stab of pain tore through him, and he sank back, uttering a shrill cry in a voice that hardly seemed his own. His wife, at the door, folded her hands in prayer, her old mouth moving constantly in a silent dialogue with God.

"Take it easy. I'm here," said Lingen. He sat on the edge of the bed beside the sick man, passing his hands over the farmer's stomach. The diagnosis was easy enough; the man's belly was swollen, the skin taut over it, his powerful old body was shaking feverishly, racked with pain. Lingen bent down to ask him, "How long have you been like this?"

"Since last night." The farmer gasped, teeth chattering. "It—it suddenly came over me. I put a hot-water bottle on it and rubbed the place, but—"

"Oh, good God! What a crazy thing to do!" The farmer's hands were clutching at his belly again, and Lingen thrust them almost roughly away and down to the mattress. He turned to the farmer's wife. "He must go to the hospital at once!"

"But we don't have a phone." The old woman folded her hands again.

"Where's Jobst?" Jobst was the farmer's son.

"He's been in town since yesterday, selling the wool."

"Well then, where's the nearest doctor?"

"That's in town too—but it's two hours' journey—and the doctor may not be there in the afternoon." The farmer's wife collapsed on to a stool, staring at Dr. Lingen. "Is my husband going to die, doctor?"

"Yes," said Lingen, honestly. "It's more than likely he'll be dead before we can fetch the nearest doctor, or get an ambulance here." He looked at the little, work-worn old woman, her folded hands, her dull old eyes, and was pierced to the heart by her resignation to an apparently inevitable fate. And something he thought he had killed, buried, hidden away for ever came alive in him.

"You must boil water—plenty of it!" he said briskly. "Put every pan you have on the stove. And scrub the big table in the living room, and get out your cleanest sheets. I'll be back in twenty minutes!"

He ran out of the house, hearing the voice of the farmer's wife behind him crying out, "Oh, doctor, God has answered my prayers!"

Lingen mounted Oberon, applying his spurs to the horse for

the very first time. Oberon laid his ears forward and flung his head back. "Get moving, you devil!" Lingen shouted. He dug his spurs into the horse's flanks again. Oberon whinnied, then galloped off over the snowy moors, racing through the birch wood, leaping such obstacles as tree trunks. Lingen's hat blew off, his thighs quivered with the effort of staying in the saddle, and the icy air whipped his face as the horse beneath him raced across country.

As he rode into the castle park he saw Weigel and a woman standing by the frozen lake. "My God!" cried Weigel, amazed to see Lingen ride out of the wood at such a speed. "What on earth is the matter . . . ?"

Lingen threw himself off the horse before Oberon had even stopped. His knees weak, he walked the last few paces toward the two figures in the snow. "We need your car, Deacon!" he gasped. "There are surgical instruments in the infirmary, aren't there? I'll need all your equipment, and ether, and circulatory preparations. Any zephirol in the place? And can you assist me in an operation? Quick—every minute counts!"

He flung his arms round Brigitte, gave her a quick kiss, started running to the castle, then stopped, came back and said gently, "I'm very glad you're here, Brigitte."

Weigel grabbed his jacket as he turned away again. "What *is* all this, doctor?"

"Oh, don't waste time asking questions, for God's sake! It's the farmer out there on the moors—he's dying. He treated his inflamed appendix with a hot-water bottle last night and massaged it—now 's ruptured, and the whole abdominal cavity is inflamed! I must operate at once."

"You?" said Deacon Weigel, hesitantly.

"By the time an ambulance could get out here it'll be too late! We shall never get him to the nearest doctor either, and his son Jobst is away. Look, if I don't operate that man will certainly die. *Now* do you understand?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Never mind *buts*!" shouted Lingen. "Get your car. I'll find the equipment in the infirmary."

"I'll come with you, Konrad," said Brigitte.

"Yes, of course. I'll need you to hold an operating lamp; they've no proper lighting in that living room. Come on—talking won't get us anywhere!"

The voice of medical authority. Brigitte looked at Deacon,

her eyes shining. Dr. Konrad Lingen is back again, her glance said.

Twenty minutes later Lingen was back at the farmer's bedside. The old man's temperature had risen, his face was scarlet, but his body was shivering as if with cold. The solid oak table in the living room had been scrubbed, according to Lingen's instructions, there were sheets on it, and five large pans of water were boiling on the kitchen stove.

They carried the farmer from his bed to the table, undressed him and covered his hot, shivering body with sheets, leaving only the operation area exposed, the place where Lingen would make the incision. He had already put the instruments into one of the pans of boiling water; now he was setting out bottles and syringes.

"Have you ever assisted at an operation before?" he asked Deacon.

"No." Weigel was washing his hands in a zephirol solution in a tin bowl. "I've had first aid training—but no, I've never assisted at an operation before."

"Well, you only have to do as I tell you. And do it quickly, no questions! And don't faint. I should warn you that blood and pus stink."

"Don't worry, doctor." Weigel managed a weak smile. "I'll manage."

Lying on the table, the farmer groaned and looked at his wife. "He's going to cut me open, Jule, isn't he?" he gasped, between two cries of pain. "Listen, if I die, tell Jobst there's an envelope with five hundred dollars in it under the loose floorboard in the bedroom . . ."

"You're not going to die," said Dr. Lingen, swabbing the farmer's stomach with alcohol. His throat had constricted as soon as he read the label on the bottle, and now he could smell the spirit, rubbing it into the farmer's skin with his fingers and a cotton wool swab, inhaling the vapors deeply and bending lower than necessary over the operation area. Gently, Brigitte touched his shoulder. He swiftly rose upright, and went on cleaning the man's stomach.

"Can you see?" she asked. "Shall I hold the light closer?" She had a hand-held spotlight. "Is that better, Konrad?"

He nodded, unable to speak; his voice would have failed him. He threw the swab under the table, picked up a syringe of hexobarbitol and injected it into a vein in the farmer's arm.

A few seconds later the man's head fell to one side, and his eyes rolled up.

"Very well; we can start," said Lingen. "I've operated under much worse conditions in Russia, with no means of sterilization at all, using blunt instruments. This is comparative luxury!" He was trying to reassure Deacon, just coming out of the kitchen with the sterilized instruments, which he laid out on one of the sheets. "You stand opposite me, Deacon. I'll make the incision, you swab the wound and then apply artery forceps where I show you. And whatever you do, don't faint; as I said, a layman is likely to find the smell appalling."

Deacon nodded. With a brisk, decisive movement, Lingen picked up the scalpel, tried its edge on his thumb . . . and lowered it again.

He could feel nothing. The ball of his thumb was utterly without sensation. Lips compressed, Lingen put the scalpel down, spread out his fingers and placed them on the farmer's stomach.

Nothing. Nothing at all. No feeling, no sensitivity of touch whatever. It was impossible for him to open up the man's stomach, manipulate the fine blood vessels, remove the appendix, clean the peritoneum. He could feel nothing with his fingers, it was like groping among cotton wool. He lacked the greatest and most vital of a surgeon's gifts, that sense of touch on which his patients' lives depend.

For the farmer, it was a sentence of death. He could not operate, not like this. There was only one way to restore sensitivity to his fingers: a relapse into drinking.

He turned away, staring out of the window. Deacon looked at Brigitte, both of them as pale as the sheets between them.

"What . . . what's the matter, doctor?" asked Weigel, as Lingen began taking his rubber apron off.

"I can't operate."

"But why not?"

"I . . . I . . ." Dr. Lingen exhaled deeply. "Put the farmer back to bed. I'll give him painkilling injections to ease his death."

"But *why* can't you operate, doctor?" repeated Weigel. "I thought we had all that was necessary! We can't let the man die!"

"We do not have a competent surgeon, Deacon." Lingen turned. There were deep shadows under his eyes; in the space

of three minutes he seemed to have aged years. "I have no feeling at all in my fingertips. I haven't had any since my car accident. I can only recover my sense of touch if . . . if I drink."

Deacon stood by the table, perfectly immobile. The farmer was moaning slightly under the anesthetic, while his wife prayed quietly, over and over again, "Lord, have mercy on us! Lord, have mercy on us!" Brigitte was still holding the spotlight above the iodine-painted operation area.

"Try, doctor! Try!" stammered Deacon.

"You might as well ask a child to operate! He and I would make the same number of mistakes."

"Please, try!"

"Surely it would be better for the poor man to die of peritonitis than under my knife! I have a prejudice against committing murder."

Deacon leaned against the wall, sweat pouring into his eyes and down his face. "Then—then you'd better drink, doctor! In God's name, do it. There's a man's life at stake. Drink, and then operate."

Dr. Lingen hesitated. He stared at the bottle of pure alcohol he had been using to swab his patient's skin. Following his glance, Weigel picked up the bottle, took a glass from a wall cupboard and poured it a quarter full. "How much should I dilute it?" he asked hoarsely.

"Fill the glass. Toward the end I was needing four glasses of cognac, but that's some time ago now."

Weigel ran to the kitchen, they heard the tap running, then he came back with the full glass in his hands and gave it to Lingen as if it were a chalice.

Lingen looked at his wife. "I'm sorry, Brigitte," he said. "I must do it, I can't let the man die. We're in a vicious circle; there's no escape."

He put the glass to his lips and took the first sip. To his surprise, he found it tasted quite revolting. He just managed to get another mouthful down, feeling he was about to vomit as the alcohol burned its way down his throat and esophagus. But he finished the glass, forcing himself to swallow the alcohol, fighting his disgust all the time. When he put the glass down, a shudder ran through his body.

There was complete silence in the dimly lit room. Deacon and Brigitte were still waiting by the table. Lingen leaned against the wall, staring straight ahead. He felt the alcohol rise

to his brain, felt his sense of gravity disappear; he raised his hand and passed it over the wall, the window frame and its panes, shutting his eyes so as not to see what he was touching.

He felt something uneven—the head of a nail. A hard little bump where a drip of paint had dried. A fine groove in the wood where the carpenter's plane had left the slightest of scars.

His fingertips were obeying him again. He had his delicate sense of touch back, so incredibly sensitive he would have said he could feel a mote of dust.

"Very well. We can start," he said into the silence. He came away from the wall, dipping his hands in the sterile solution again, let the liquid drip off them, and picked up the scalpel.

His first incision into the skin was tentative.

His second, into the fascial layer, was quick and confident.

As he divided the musculature and opened up the peritoneum, the elegance of Lingen's operating skill was in full evidence again. Cold sweat ran down Deacon's face as he fought back his nausea. With trembling fingers, he applied the artery forceps, swabbed the blood, lifted pus out of the abdominal cavity.

"Of all the idiotic things to have done!" commented Lingen in a matter-of-fact voice. There seemed to be no difference now between his own operating theater, gleaming with chrome fittings, and this farmhouse room, blackened with age. "Massaging this muck into his own stomach! Hold the light a bit lower Brigitte. That's right—closer. Use one hand to hold your nose if you can't stand the smell, but keep the light steady. Deacon, see to his pulse. Inject 1.7 cc. of Coramine 4. Think you can manage an intravenous injection?"

"Yes," said Weigel, with difficulty. He was close to vomiting.

"Good. Carry on."

Carefully, painstakingly, Lingen cleaned the pus out of the abdominal cavity, loosened intestinal conglutinations, removed blood clots. He was working like a man inspired. I can operate again, he was thinking. I have my sense of touch back!

Then, by chance, his eyes fell on the empty glass. And then on Brigitte's face. As she held the light above the farmer's opened abdomen, tears were running silently down her cheeks.

"Brigitte—I shall manage to do it some day without that," said Lingen quietly. "I swear I will. I will not sink back into the mire!"

Old Jons Briddeck, the sheep farmer, was saved. Thanks to a glass of alcohol, he would live.

Poverty is uninteresting: it smells of cooked cabbage and unaired beds. But once a family begins to rise above misfortune, into a freer air, envy and mistrust set in among their neighbors.

Susanne soon found this out on her shopping expeditions. "What, another new hairdo, Mrs. Kaul?" one woman might say. "Well, after all, you want to make yourself pretty when your husband's earning good money, don't you. We all know there are other women in the world..." Or the butcher would tell her, "Nice bit of veal in today! Too expensive? Why, Mrs. Kaul, I thought your husband was practically running the loony bin these days! Interesting job, that, I'm sure!"

"Let's go away, Peter!" Susanne said one evening. "Anywhere, I don't mind! I just don't want to live here anymore. They're laying bets on when you'll first come home drunk again! Only the other day someone asked if I wasn't in my seventh month, and what if the child was like poor little Gundi?" Susanne shook her head violently, and then laid it on Peter's shoulder. "I can't stand it much longer."

Next day, Kaul had a word with Judo Fritz. "No problem," said the male nurse. "When our bungalow's ready you can have my old apartment! It went with the job, but I'll have a word with personnel. After all, you're on the staff of this nut house now."

Delighted, Peter thanked him. The bungalow was very nearly finished; all it needed now was the flooring and carpets, and then the Kellermanns could move in. Kaul was going along at the moment to help with the papering; he had always papered the walls of his own apartment.

One evening, while Fritz was on night duty at the hospital and Kaul was working on the bungalow, Lucie, Fritz's wife, turned up again. She stood watching him paint paste on the strips of wallpaper.

"Well, there are *some* things you can do pretty well!" said Lucie, making it sound like a challenge. "I'd no idea." And suddenly she seized Kaul's shoulders, pressing herself against him. "Kiss me!" she demanded. "Go on, kiss me! I'm not used to having people turn me down, you know, I always get anyone I want. Hold me—touch me!" And when Kaul went rigid,

turning his head away, she laughed a quiet, dangerous little laugh. "If you don't do it, I'll tell Fritz you tried it anyway! But if you *do* do it, you've a good chance of getting away without a broken nose. You know what Fritz is like. He loves me too, he really does. So?" She was leaning back, winding her arms round Kaul's neck. "Well, aren't you going to kiss me, Saint Peter? I'm just crazy for you—you're the first man ever not to do what I wanted right away, but I've heard that sort are fantastic later on!"

She had him pressed against the wall. She was a voluptuous, blonde little animal, her eyes shining, her breath coming fast. When he tried to free himself, touching her breast by accident in the process, she moaned as if in pain, then flung herself hard against him and bit his neck.

Peter lowered his head and thrust it forward. The movement threw Lucie against the trestle table he had been using to paste the wallpaper. It fell over, taking Lucie with it; she knocked her head against the edge of the table with a dull thud, and lay there perfectly still, among the bucket of paste and the strips of wallpaper.

The paper had a flowered pattern on a yellow background, with a satin stripe effect. Cheerful, welcoming wallpaper for the hall: "Come on in, good to see you!" the language of flowers...

"Lucie!" cried Peter, standing by the wall. "Get up, Lucie! I didn't mean to hurt you. Please—forgive me! Get up!"

But Lucie Kellermann did not move. She lay there with a strip of flowered wallpaper stuck right across her face.

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Kaul dared not even move to see what had happened to Lucie. She lay there like a shop window dummy, her skirt tucked up and showing her lace-trimmed black underwear; the stocking on her left leg was twisted.

"Lucie . . ." stammered Kaul again. The palms of his hands were sticky with sweat. "Don't be silly, Lucie, get up! Look, I'm sorry!" But still Lucie did not move. There was no alternative: he had to bend down, peel the strip of wallpaper off her face, and see what was wrong.

There was a thin trickle of blood running from Lucie's nose. Her eyes were sunken, her lips pale, almost waxen. Kaul did not realize that she was, in fact, still breathing. I've killed her, he thought. That blood, running from her nose . . . her skull's fractured at the base.

And it was his doing that she was lying there among the rolls of wallpaper and the bucket of paste. Who, now, was going to ask why? His guilt was only too obvious. Judo Fritz would maim him, would murder him.

Kaul crouched by the wall, unable to take the essential step of fetching a doctor. She's dead, or anyway dying, he thought. When I believed I'd caused Johann Milbach's death, that was a delusion, but this is real—I really *have* killed someone now, even if it was in self-defense. Self-defense! That's a laugh! Peter Kaul, the man who kills a woman trying to seduce him. Doesn't that prove he's crazy? Back to the nut house for him, back to Ward 70 and the babbling, delirious idiots, the drunken queers, the naked scum of society!

Well, now he knew where he was: back where he belonged. He rose and made his way unsteadily to the door. He did not

have far to go; the self-service discount store was just around the corner. He bought two bottles of rum, carried them back to the Kellermanns' bungalow, went inside and saw Lucie still lying there, though the blood had stopped running from her nose, and her skin was yellowish. She's dead all right, Peter thought, quite calmly. The little tart. She won't be giving any more good husbands trouble.

He sat down and opened the first bottle, sniffing it. Rum, he thought, I've never drunk rum before, but it says 73 percent alcohol on the label. Four good drinks of that, and the world won't mean a thing, you'll be floating on a pink cloud. Another four, and you won't even feel Fritz bashing your head in.

The first sip was pure hell. Kaul put the bottle down, groaning. It's like sulphuric acid, he thought, it's burning my mouth, my gullet, my stomach. My God, they must have gotten the labels on the bottles mixed up.

The second sip was easier to get down. Eventually, Kaul began to feel his head going around. The drink's getting to my nerves, he thought, into the windings of my brain. Marvelous!

They found Lucie about eleven o'clock, still among the rolls of flower-patterned wallpaper with the satin stripe effect, and Peter squatting on the ground beside her, an empty rum bottle near him, singing in a tremulous but not unmusical voice.

Judo Fritz himself came upon this grotesque but comic scene. He had expected Lucie in his room in the hospital, but she did not turn up. When he was on night duty she would sometimes come to his room there for a bit of sex—something to cheer him up for the long night shift. Judo Fritz had paid a quick visit to the Kauls' apartment to find out from Peter whether Lucie was feeling ill again; she seemed to have had rather a number of migraines lately. But Peter was not home yet, and Susanne was sitting in the kitchen feeling rather uneasy, playing patience, with the radio quietly playing Strauss waltzes. The children were already asleep.

"Hm, fair enough, but we don't want Peter overworking," said Fritz. "He doesn't have to get the whole hall papered in one evening. What d'you bet Lucie's taken him over a thermos of coffee . . . hey, let's go and see. Coming, Susanne?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Kellermann," she said. "I *am* rather worried . . . he's not usually so late getting home."

Fritz handed over his charges to the male nurse in Wing 1 for an hour, and drove out to the bungalow with Susanne.

While Susanne cried out, knelt down beside her husband

and drew his swaying head to her breast, Judo Fritz, without any visible sign of emotion, put his huge ear to Lucie's chest and listened to her heart. He nodded, taking in the situation at a glance.

"We'll keep all this to ourselves, Susanne," he said, in an unusually subdued voice. "Let's get Peter out of here. I'll just call an ambulance for Lucie first. She's alive all right."

"But—but what happened?" stammered Susanne. She slapped Kaul's cheeks, forcing him to look at her. "Peter, what happened? What have you done to Lucie?"

"Don't ask any questions, Susanne," Judo Fritz was looking down at his wife. "You take him home, let him sleep it off. I'll make his excuses for him at work tomorrow. And when he does wake up, just tell him thank you from me."

Lucie survived the night in the neurosurgical hospital, after they had opened up her skull and removed a hemotoma threatening the main brain functions. Judo Fritz said she had had an accident when he took her in. "Slipped on the wallpaper paste and hit her head on the table edge," he said. She would be all right, with nothing but an operation scar to show for a memento of Peter.

Next morning, Judo Fritz was at Kaul's bed, looking down at his friend's pale, unshaven, twitching face. Peter had still not quite sobered up. "Well, go on, hit me!" he shouted at Fritz. "Don't just stand there like a castrated elephant! Hit me! I can tell you, my head feels like glass, you won't have any trouble smashing it in. Go on, you great gorilla!"

"You shouldn't have drunk that bottle, mate," said Fritz, dully. "That was all you did wrong. I mean, that's no way out, is it? Is that the kind of thing you learn at the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings?"

"But, Fritz—Lucie..."

Judo Fritz raised a huge hand. "Don't you go telling me anything, mate," he said. "I did love her, still do, see? Can't seem to shake it off. I know she's no good, rotten right through, out in bed... and I need her. She's the only one could ever stand me." He sat down on the edge of the bed and suddenly burst into tears.

Peter held his breath and closed his eyes. This is impossible, he thought. Fritz, crying? Can rocks cry? Can a monster sob? He put his hands over his ears to shut out the sound.

Fritz Kellermann, crying like a child! Wonders would never cease!

* * *

There was a vaulted basement room in Schloss Bornfeld which had been standing empty. With the help of Brigitte and Dr. Kruger, Deacon got it fitted out to resemble a dissecting room.

A table was delivered, a table with a solid slab of marble for its surface, and a groove for blood to drain away. Next came white-enameled instrument cupboards, and a number of cages, some with wire netting, some with strong iron bars.

Konrad saw none of this. He was in bed; he had asked them to keep him under sedation, and Deacon agreed. He certainly did not want the saving of the old farmer's life to lead to a complete relapse for Dr. Lingen. And the way for such a relapse had been paved by that one glass of alcohol. After the operation, when an ambulance had come to take the farmer to the hospital, Lingen had poured out and drunk another three glasses, and neither Deacon nor Brigitte tried to stop him. They saw he needed it; they watched, between helplessness and dismay, as the weariness was washed out of his body. He went back to Schloss Bornfeld with eyes shining, without the least sign of exhaustion, to be hailed as a hero. He talked, he radiated charm and wit, he fascinated his audience, it was like having the old Konrad Lingen back again—except that his tragic obsession could be seen in his dilated, staring eyes.

The collapse came next morning, as he lay in bed beside Brigitte. It was inevitable, and expected. He begged for a drink, vomited when it was denied him, he was doubled up with stomach pains, and whimpered like a condemned man begging for his life. Not until midday did he calm down. Lying in bed, bathed in sweat, he said tonelessly, "Brigitte, if you love me—if you really love me—for God's sake get hold of ten ampoules of morphine. I'll inject them myself, if you can't . . ." He turned his face to the wall, retching again. "I don't want to go on. I just don't want to go on. I *can't* go on living, I'm a danger to you all!"

This continued for four days, days when Brigitte hardly moved from his bedside. Most of the time she lay beside him, and he was soothed to some extent by knowing he was not alone. It was during this time that the cellar vault was fitted out. The former judge, von Hammerfels, took a look at the room and then complained to Deacon. "It looks to me like equipment for vivisection!" he said indignantly. "I should like to make it plain that I utterly condemn experiments on living

creatures, and I shall not hesitate to charge Dr. Lingen—yes, and you too, Deacon!—with cruelty to animals. How can you contemplate disturbing the peace of Bornfeld with the cries of agony of poor innocent creatures? I protest!" Subsequently, he went around with a petition, collecting signatures, taking it from table to table at breakfast. But only four patients signed; the others made some excuse or other not to. Despite their work on the farm and in the gardens, life was very boring at Schloss Bornfeld, and Dr. Lingen certainly brought new interest to the place.

On the fifth day, Lingen was over the crisis. He got up, shaved and dressed. The snow had begun to thaw outside; the moors looked flooded and the fields were like swamps, with spinneys of birch trees and juniper bushes swimming like islands in the water. Oberon was just being walked in the yard, prancing nervously on the end of a leading rein.

"What should I do without you, Brigitte?" asked Lingen quietly. He turned and looked at his wife, still lying in bed. "Where do you find the strength to live with me?"

"I love you," she said calmly. "That's all."

"Suppose I told you just why I ran away to Cologne?"

"I know why."

"You never said so!"

"What would have been the point? It's over, Konrad. We must remember only the good times now, and we've had plenty of those. Why keep conjuring up dark shadows from the past? The sun rises again every day—let's be glad of that!"

"You're a wise woman, Brigitte." Lingen smiled, faintly. "To think I never knew just how wise before!" He turned to look out at the wet landscape again. "When I first saw Karin von Putthausen..."

"She's dead, poor child." Brigitte sat up. "She was hidden away to die like a poisoned rat, and buried in a hole-and-corner fashion; her own father went off on a hunting trip the very same day. He'd have mourned more for a bastard than that poor girl, his legitimate daughter!"

"She was incurable," said Lingen softly.

"But you can be cured, Konrad. You *have* been cured."

"Thank you, Brigitte." He went over to the bed, bent and kissed her forehead. "Why don't we leave Germany?" he said suddenly. "We could live anywhere."

"Why do you want to run away still, Konrad?" Brigitte got out of bed. "Your clinic is waiting for you."

"My clinic!" He sounded bitter, holding up his hands to the light coming in through the window. "With these hands, I'd turn any clinic into a slaughterhouse."

He could not help remembering what he had just said when, an hour later, he was standing in the newly whitewashed cellar vault, looking at the dissecting table, the cupboards of instruments, the marble slab, the sterilizers, the empty cages in the room next door, the big freezer, the containers of formalin solution.

"What's this for, Deacon?" he asked.

Deacon waved a hand at the place. "This is your own realm, doctor."

"What for?"

"Do I need to tell you? So you can practice your surgical skills again."

"Practice chopping up bodies? You expect me to make a hobby of slitting open guinea pigs, the way the others up there play snakes and ladders?"

"We want you to practice until you get back the sensitivity in your fingertips."

Dr. Lingen laughed ironically. "My dear Deacon, you forget I'm a neurosurgeon! I know quite well that whatever has happened inside my brain can't be corrected."

"But have you really tried practicing, intensively, before?"

"No—what would have been the point? With a drink inside me I could operate just like a computer. The drink gave some kind of jolt to the mechanism of my nerve centers, and there I was, programmed to do my job."

Deacon tapped the marble surface of the dissecting table. "I think you'll soon find your reactions come back to you without the drink. At the risk of sounding sententious, I'll say you mastered Oberon—now you must master yourself."

Lingen did not reply. He went to the cupboards of instruments, took out a pair of dissecting scissors, a curette, an amputating knife, Cooper forceps, Kocher forceps, dressing forceps, claw forceps, Collins abdominal wall retractors. He laid them all neatly side by side on a sterile towel, then stepped back and crossed his arms. "Deacon, please drop this idea! I have just touched the dressing forceps, and I couldn't even feel the ridges on their handles. As a surgeon, I'm finished."

"Maybe you feel that now, but things will be different in three, or four, or six weeks." Deacon indicated the room again. "Try it—try practicing the use of these instruments."

"You might as well say: try committing murder."

"You won't be getting any living specimens just yet."

"Oh, very well!" Lingen laughed bitterly. "Hand me a dead rat, and I'll skin it for you!"

"I do have a dead dog in the cellar next door. He was run over yesterday. At least, not run over in the ordinary sense of the word, poor thing—he ran into the car, was thrown off the hood, and then lay dead in the road. Do dogs ever die of shock, so to speak? It would be interesting to know."

Deacon left the room without waiting for an answer. Lingen watched the door close, and then laid the palm of his hand over the array of instruments. Suddenly he shut his eyes and began feeling the shining metal.

Which is this one? he asked himself. Kocher forceps or dressing forceps? Cooper forceps or dissecting scissors? Which of all these instruments is the claw forceps?

He felt them, letting his fingers run over them again and again. Then he picked one up.

"Cooper forceps!" he said out loud.

Wrong. Halsted mosquito forceps.

"Well, try again," said Lingen, his voice echoing back from the vaulting. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

Eyes closed, fingers groping. Hard, hostile, smooth metal.

"Hard stomach clamp," said Lingen.

Eyes open. Wrong again: appendix crusher.

At the ninth attempt, he got it right. He *was* holding the abdominal retractors. Happy as a child with a present, he held them up to the light. "Marvelous!" His voice trembled. "Even if I did do it by guesswork . . ."

Half an hour later, the dead dog, a black and white terrier, was lying on the marble slab. Lips compressed, Lingen was opening up the animal's thoracic and abdominal cavities. He could still make the larger, less delicate incisions—it was when he got further in that he found his knife slipping, he severed arteries, damaged vital nerves and sinews, and all the time he was thinking: If that dog had still been alive when I started, he'd be dead now. Died under the knife. I'm taking him apart with the murderous skill of a Jack the Ripper.

Brigitte met Deacon in the great hall of the castle. "Have you seen my husband?" she asked, worried. "I've been looking for him for the last half hour. He told me he'd be going to the stables, but he isn't there."

"We mustn't disturb him at the moment." Deacon took

Brigitte's arm and led her aside. "He's determining the cause of death of one small black and white terrier."

"Oh, God . . . if he can do that . . ." breathed Brigitte.

Deacon nodded energetically. "He will. He has driving ambition to help him."

"The cause of death was crushing of the cerebellum. The dog received a blow on the head, resulting in immediate paralysis of the striated musculature, and a brain hemorrhage hastened death." Lingen sat down opposite Deacon and Brigitte, exhausted. They had been waiting for him in the castle's winter garden. "Can I have a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, of course, doctor," Weigel jumped to his feet. "I'll order one at once."

"And make it a strong one, Weigel!"

"You'll get one with the spoon standing up in it!"

Weigel left the winter garden. Lingen waited until he was out of earshot, then leaned forward. "I didn't dissect that dog, Brigitte," he said, breathing deeply. "I practically tore it to pieces!"

"Konrad, in a few weeks' time you'll be able to dissect the finest of nerves again. I know you will!" She took his head in her hands and kissed his tired eyes. "Was it so bad?"

"Appalling, Brigitte! I didn't see the ductus choledochus, and I cut right through it; I simply couldn't feel it at all."

"In three weeks, you'll be able to locate it with your eyes closed."

"What makes you all brave enough to expect the impossible?" he asked gently.

"It's because we love you, Konrad." She stroked his black hair. "Don't they say love can move mountains?"

Soon word got around that the local farmers could bring their dead beasts to Schloss Bornfeld, and be paid ten dollars each for them. All the local people knew was that Deacon and one of his guests took the corpses down to the cellars themselves, offering no explanation. On hearing this strange story, the vet called at Schloss Bornfeld to say the district council veterinary office had been informed of these strange practices, and would be sending someone soon to check up on any possible danger of infection. Deacon thereupon took the vet down to the cellars, making him promise to keep quiet. He opened the door of the big vault and let the vet glance inside.

The vet saw a man standing at a dissecting table in an operating gown, a rubber apron, with a linen cap on and a mask over his mouth. He was just dividing several cords of muscle from a calf's leg and dissecting the sinews. Weigel quickly closed the door again as the vet allowed an exclamation of surprise to escape him.

"What on earth are you up to, Deacon? Making a horror film or something?" inquired the vet, making his way out into the fresh air. "And who was that?"

"That was Dr. Konrad Lingen, the internationally famous brain surgeon. He's practicing—practicing how to make the simplest of surgical incisions, without the influence of alcohol." Weigel nodded to the still speechless vet. "It's a means of therapy. Work therapy, we call it. You need have no worries about our use of the dead animals."

"I'll have to let them know about this at the council offices, Deacon."

"Do that. And tell them we bury the animals after dissection. We cover them with chloride of lime; it's perfectly hygienic and quite legal."

In five weeks' time, forsythia and daffodils were in bloom, hyacinths were scenting the air, tulips were beginning to open—and Dr. Lingen carried a threadlike structure, fine as a hair, in a shallow glass dish to Weigel's office.

"What's that?" asked Weigel.

"A nerve from the brain, Deacon." Lingen was careful to keep his voice steady. "A dog's brain. In a human head it would be equivalent to the nervus glossopharyngicus. It passes through the frontal section of the jugular foramen." Breathing heavily, he put the glass dish down on Weigel's desk, as if it were a precious gift. "I have just dissected it out. With these fingers, Deacon!" He raised his hands and spread them out. "I could feel it, with these hands! My sense of touch has come back!"

Deacon was too overcome by emotion to speak; it was some time before he could control his voice.

"Tomorrow we will try using living specimens," he said quietly, pressing both Dr. Lingen's hands. "How do you feel, doctor?"

"Like a mountaineer on a peak above the clouds—suddenly realizing he feels dizzy."

"But in no danger of falling back down the mountain!"

"No." Lingen shook his head slowly. "All he fears is *climbing* down again."

No one discovered the connection between Lucie Kellermann's accident and Peter Kaul's sudden indisposition. Judo Fritz made his excuses at work, inventing a shocking cold which kept Kaul in bed. He mentioned it to Professor Brosius.

Brosius was in a good mood. He had heard that Konrad Lingen was handing over his clinic to Dr. Kruger and going into retirement. There was now a vacancy on the courts' lists of officially appointed medical experts, and it had been hinted that this time Brosius would not be snubbed. So he was feeling genial. "Glad to hear your wife is going to be all right after that stupid accident, Fritz," he said. "Well, you can always say you're married to a fallen woman now, eh?" He laughed heartily at this very ancient joke; Judo Fritz managed a weak grin. "And how is Kaul, then?"

"Nasty cold, Professor."

"Tell him to look after himself, Fritz. If it was you or me, I'd say: go to bed with a stiff toddy. But that wouldn't do for Kaul. As you know, one sip of alcohol is fatal for a reformed alcoholic."

Petra and Heinz did not even guess at the catastrophe which had only just been averted from their family; they saw their Daddy lying in bed, silent and apathetic, and believed in the story of his cold. As for Peter himself, he lay reliving the scene with Lucie, seeing her lying on the floor like a broken doll, with the blood running from her nose. But the bottle of rum he had drunk was the final barrier he had needed to erect between himself and his alcoholism; he realized that, and was grateful for it. The two days after he got drunk had been hell; he felt he would vomit up everything inside him, suffering appalling nausea. Judo Fritz did what he could by bringing medication to soothe his stomach from the drugs cupboard at the hospital, and opiates which drained Kaul of energy and kept him in bed.

On the second day, however, Father Merckel called.

"A card from the Clinica Santa Barbara!" he said, waving a picture postcard of Ascona. "From Dr. Hutli—you remember him?"

"Yes," said Kaul weakly. "Of course."

Merckel sat down. His body still looked bear-like, the organ tones of his voice were deep as ever, but his face seemed to

have grown smaller, becoming thin and wrinkled like a monkey's, his skin yellowish and leathery.

"He says that Gundula has become the pet of the whole clinic," he told Peter. "They've been giving her special treatment—and listen to this! Gundula can stand on her own for several minutes now. She's found out what legs are meant for!"

"Good," said Kaul, indifferently. "In ten years or so I expect she'll be breaking the girls' hundred-yard dash record."

Father Merckel got up and went out of the room. "What's the matter with him?" he asked Susanne, and when, instead of replying, she turned away in tears, Father Merckel asked, "Has he been drinking again? Tell me the truth, Susanne."

So, briefly, Susanne told him about Lucie Kellermann. Father Merckel listened without interrupting her.

"Well, that should be the very last temptation," he said, when Susanne had finished. "We have many trials to bear on earth, but I do believe—I feel it deep inside me—that your husband will never drink again now."

"If only that could be true, Father!"

"It will be, for Peter. It's too late for some people." Father Merckel sniffed. "You're baking?"

"Yes, Father. A Black Forest cherry cake, for Petra's birthday tomorrow."

"A Black Forest cherry cake needs a dash of kirsch in it," said Father Merckel cheerfully.

"Yes, I've got a small bottle. Peter doesn't know about it—and when I've made the cake the cream will drown the flavor of kirsch in the filling. Anyway, Peter doesn't like creamy cakes, so he won't be having any of it."

Father Merckel nodded. "Very wise." He pushed open the kitchen door, and saw the little bottle of kirsch on the table. His eyes lit up. "Will you offer me a glass of kirsch, my daughter?" he asked politely.

"Of course, Father. A small glass or a big one?"

"A big one, my daughter! Do I look as if I were made to drink from thimbles?"

Susanne poured him half a small tumbler; Merckel, watching, would really have preferred her to fill it. But when she handed it to him he put it to his thick lips, opened his mouth, and tossed back the strong spirit. He set down the glass, drew up a kitchen chair and sat down on it, folding his hands over his paunch. He read the label on the bottle with loving attention, tempted to ask for another glass.

But he never got around to it. An intolerable, stabbing pain went through the lower regions of his stomach. His folded hands dropped, pressing against his liver, a groan escaped him, he looked at Susanne with the pleading eyes of a dog and collapsed, face down, on the kitchen table. "Oh, Lord Jesus!" he said, with remarkable clarity. "If it must be so—then I will not fight it any more."

He sighed, a sound like a balloon deflating, his hands fell to his sides, and he lost consciousness.

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Peter lay in bed looking at the ceiling. He was thinking of Gundula, of many things that had happened recently: of Dr. Lingen, for instance, who had declined to listen to him, and of the men in Ward 70 of the State Mental Hospital. He could hear the murmur of Father Merckel's voice as he talked to Susanne, and her answer. Then there was a sudden silence, followed by a scream. As he swung his legs out of bed, the door was flung open and Susanne, eyes wide and terrified, looked in.

"It's Father Merckel!" she gasped. "Peter, he's lying on the kitchen table! He—he doesn't speak!"

It was easy enough to see what had happened. Kaul bent over Merckel, smelled the kirsch, saw the bottle on the table, and looked at his wife.

"It was only for the cake, Peter," Susanne's voice was pleading. "Just a spoonful in the cherry filling, and I know you don't like creamy cakes anyway, Peter..."

Kaul picked up the bottle, carried it to the window and threw it out. He watched it fall almost vertically, shattering in the yard below. The kirsch splashed over two dustbins. Then he ran for the nearest phone.

Ten minutes later an ambulance was pulling up outside the building. The neighbors were all at their windows, shops emptied, their customers standing by the roadside holding their shopping baskets. So it had happened! Peter was being taken off to the mental hospital again. Once a drinker, always a drinker, that's what they'd always said. Poor Mrs. Kaul, and with her fourth child due too! Well, here comes the ambulance to take him off. He must be really bad this time; the ambulance

men were carrying a stretcher into the building, and there was even a doctor with them.

The whispers grew louder as Susanne came downstairs. Poor thing, looks quite calm, doesn't she? Well, she'll be used to it by now. And here comes the stretcher, with the doctor beside it, looking very grave. That's the end of Peter Kaul! Look at his poor wife, will you, standing there by the ambulance door watching them load her husband in! No tears—drained of emotion, poor soul, can't even cry. Wonder if the priest would say a drunken bastard like Peter Kaul would ever get to Heaven? It'd be interesting to know who you're likely to meet there...

Hello, here comes someone else...

When Peter came out of the front door of the building, the spectators' faces froze. He looked around at their hostile expressions, as they stood at their windows or by the roadside. So it isn't you after all? Their eyes were accusing him. Then who is it?

Kaul got into the front of the ambulance with the driver, the doctor accompanied the man on the stretcher in the back. The blue light on the roof began to flash, the siren howled, and the vehicle drove off at top speed, leaving Susanne alone in the doorway.

"Who was that?" asked Mrs. Siegfried, who, to the envy of the other women, had beaten them all to reach Susanne.

"The priest," said Susanne quietly. "Father Merckel. He's ill. Very ill indeed."

"Well, I never!" said Mrs. Wilhelmine Kappuska in the grocery squeezing the cabbages to find one with a nice tight head. "Always takes the wrong ones, doesn't it? I dare say the poor father was so upset about Kaul he had a stroke. Or maybe Kaul even knocked him down! Really, that man Kaul—shocking, I call it!"

In the cellar vault, Konrad was finishing his first operation on a live animal. Deacon and Brigitte stood beside him as he cut open the stomach of a dog who had swallowed a sharp, rusty nail, and removed the object. Lingen worked alone, from the first incision to the last stitch. His fingers, moving with a sure touch, never allowed the watchers to think for a moment that anything could go wrong. Those hands radiated confidence, translating their owner's brilliant technical knowledge into action.

When the dog, saved from an agonizing death, was lifted from the marble table and taken away, Lingen took off his rubber gloves, dipped his hands in the zephirol sterile solution, and dried them. The rings around his eyes showed he was tired, but he was happy too. He let out a deep sigh as Brigitte kissed him, wordlessly.

"I'd like a cigarette, please, Brigitte," he said. His voice was rough and exhausted.

Deacon came back into the cellar vault, carrying a bottle and glass. Lingen was smoking his cigarette, inhaling deeply as he leaned against the marble slab. The place still smelled of blood from the dog's warm body, and of its fermented stomach contents.

"I'll go riding on Oberon again tomorrow," he called out as Weigel came in. "I feel strong enough to tackle anything! I've never known such a will to live before!"

"Good!" Weigel put the bottle and glass down on the table. Dr. Lingen stared in horror at the label, his cigarette slipping from his fingers.

"Are you crazy, Deacon?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, it *is* schnapps, doctor." Weigel poured some into the glass, and screwed the top back on the bottle. "Your very good health, Lingen!"

Dr. Lingen did not move. Brigitte, very pale, was leaning against the thick cellar wall. She did not understand what was going on; she only knew she was afraid. Dreadfully afraid. She wanted to shout or scream, but her terror paralyzed her.

"What's the idea?" asked Dr. Lingen.

"A toast to your success, doctor!"

"*With this*?"

"You've just achieved the greatest triumph of your life! You are your old self again. Don't you think that calls for a celebration?"

"Deacon, you must have been taking lessons in temptation from the Devil himself!" The glass was within Lingen's reach; Weigel was observing the doctor out of the corner of his eye while he pretended to be looking out of the window into the yard. Lingen acted. He picked up the glass, carried it over to a lidded bucket, poured the alcohol into the bucket, dropped the glass in after it and snapped the lid down again. Deacon turned around to face him.

"You can go home in two days' time, doctor."

Lingen shook his head. "I don't particularly want to."

"You're cured, doctor."

"You think so?" Lingen smiled his ironic smile. "Gesture for gesture, my dear Deacon! You offer me a glass of schnapps to see how I react. In order to please you, I react in the way you hope I will. Is that a cure?"

"A few weeks ago you'd have drunk that glass without hesitation."

"On my own, yes. Not in front of my wife." Lingen sat down on a stool. What am I talking about? he thought. I was afraid to drink, that's the truth. Is fear any proof of a cure? Have I exchanged the furtiveness of the secret drinker for the addict's downright terror?

He raised his hands, looking at his fingertips. They do have their sense of touch back, he thought, and the loss of it lay at the root of my drinking problem. But how has the miracle happened? Physically speaking, it's impossible! The damage was done in the nerve centers of my brain—how *can* it have been corrected by mere training and practice? In any event, the one thing I must not do is deceive myself, be afraid—afraid of my own nature for the rest of my life.

"Come, Konrad," said Brigitte quietly, taking his hands. She pulled him up from the stool, put her arm through his, and led him out of the cellar vault. Deacon followed them in silence as far as the hall, when he went to his office and put the bottle of schnapps away in a safe, behind three combination locks.

In the Lingens' room, Brigitte undressed without a word and lay down on the bed. Lingen stared at her, sweat gathering on his furrowed brow. He swallowed, biting his lower lip nervously.

"Konrad!" said Brigitte softly. "Konrad . . ."

"You're as beautiful as ever," he said, dully. "But I—I'm a wreck."

"You're tall, and strong, only you've forgotten . . . come here and let me help you remember."

He went slowly over to the bed and sat down.

"Do *you* want me to come home?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I shall need a great deal of patience and love, Brigitte."

"I have plenty of both."

"I shall probably be unbearable at times."

"There's nothing about you I couldn't bear."

He nodded. "Very well," he said hoarsely. "Let's go home.

I shall try to face the world, pretend to be the old, humorous, brilliant Konrad Lingen. But, Brigitte, the other side of me is tired—tired to death—and it hates my old self . . ."

Two days later Konrad was discharged from Schloss Bornfeld. His return to run his own Lingen Clinic and take up his profession again roused Professor Brosius to a remarkable amount of professional activity himself.

He first called the Board of Public Health to inquire if it was permissible for an alcoholic to return to practicing medicine. When told that it was, so long as the person in question was cured, Brosius snapped rather incautiously, "I have never seen an alcoholic who was one hundred percent cured, and I've been running the State Mental Hospital for thirty years now!" Then he slammed the receiver down, and wondered how his rival, so neatly removed before, could be dealt with for a second time.

Professor Brosius, frustrated cavalry officer and distinguished academic, proceeded to put a couple of spokes in Lingen's wheel. For a doctor, this is a simple and perfectly plausible matter: you repudiate a diagnosis your colleague has made, offering another of your own, quite different and equally incapable of proof. Psychiatry offers great scope for this kind of thing, since there is no sector of medicine where opinions still differ so widely.

So Professor Brosius waited for Lingen's next psychiatric report to be sent on to him from the courts, along with the patient whom Lingen, as an expert witness, had examined. This was only three days after Lingen's return. Brosius was delighted: he welcomed the patient with open arms and examined him personally, using every psychiatric test in the book. Then he wrote his report:

"I have interviewed the patient Ernest Ludwig Mayhaller, born June 10, 1917, recommended by Dr. Konrad Lingen to be committed to the State Mental Hospital for observation, and have come to the conclusion that he is not mentally ill in the psychiatric sense of the word. I therefore cannot confirm Dr. Lingen's diagnosis of schizophrenic delusions and paranoia. In my opinion, restraint in the State Mental Hospital is not necessary. E. L. Mayhaller is suffering from a mild form of manic depressive psychosis, which gives no occasion for alarm, nor does he represent a danger to the public."

Ernst Ludwig Mayhaller was duly discharged from the State Mental Hospital. A day later, down by the river Ruhr, he

murdered a complete stranger. "He came up and said he was Hannibal and I was an elephant," Mayhaller stated at the preliminary hearing of his case. "Well, your honor, I'm not an elephant. I can prove I'm not an elephant! I'm a mule, a perfectly harmless mule. But there was this fellow Hannibal, he would insist on having an elephant!"

Decidedly shaken, Professor Brosius said something about a state of latent schizophrenia, impossible to detect, which must suddenly have pushed the man over into his delusions. Then he went to see Dr. Lingen, to try and cover himself.

He arrived at the Lingen Clinic at the same time as an ambulance drew up, a stretcher was taken out, and a man in crumpled trousers and slippers got out of the driver's cab.

"Kaul!" said Professor Brosius in surprise. "What are you doing here? And who's that on the stretcher?"

"Father Merckel, Professor."

"Father Merckel? Here? Has he had an accident?"

"Yes; his liver couldn't take alcohol anymore."

"Don't be ridiculous, Kaul! We all know you're proud of belonging to Alcoholics Anonymous, there's no need to exaggerate." Brosius strode after the stretcher, and there, indeed, was Father Merckel lying under the blankets, held in place by leather straps. He recognized Brosius, and nodded to him.

"Why what's all this, Father?" asked Brosius, bracingly, bending over the white head. Then he saw the spots of dried blood at the corners of the priest's mouth. He knew what they meant; he could hardly believe it.

"I'm dying, Professor." Father Merckel coughed, spat out a blood clot, and sighed. "God is not merciful enough to let me go quickly, and how can I blame him, when I have sinned against him for years, day after day, night after night . . ."

"Why, Father!" protested the horrified Brosius.

"Oh, not with women, Professor! No, the bottle has been my mistress for years now. I've taken her before the eyes of the God I serve; I have even gone behind the altar to drink during divine service. But now it's over—my liver's finished, I'm bleeding to death inside."

Dr. Lingen was already waiting in the room outside the operating theater, in his operating clothes. Brosius preserved a dour silence, stepped aside, and listened to Lingen and Father Merckel talking.

"So it's my turn to come to you," said Merckel weakly. "If I were a good priest, perhaps I should insist on having a

believing Christian operate on me, but never mind all that—I trust you, Lingen. When they told me at the other hospital you were back I got them to bring me here." They had undone the straps of the stretcher now, and were lifting the priest to a couch. He raised his head slightly. "Well, so you'll cut me open, Lingen, and a fascinating demonstration object I shall be! Naturally you know the human body as well inside as out, but it will be interesting, even for you, to see how drinking can destroy a man physically. That's one reason I had myself brought here, doctor."

Dr. Lingen nodded. They understood each other, and even Professor Brosius sensed something of the tragedy being enacted here before his eyes. While Merckel was taken away to be prepared, Brosius went up to Lingen. "Are you really going to operate?" he asked. "It's a very bad case of hemorrhaging of the esophogeal varices."

"Your diagnosis is correct. Congratulations, Professor."

Brosius swallowed, then said gruffly, "Lingen, let's forget our disagreements for the moment. We'll have to discuss this Mayhaller business some time, but Father Merckel is what matters now. You're not going to perform an esophagotomy, are you?"

"That was my intention."

"It's pointless! Merckel is finished. He must have a liver as bumpy as a camel's back!"

"He has."

"And you're still going to operate?"

"Yes."

"I can't understand you, Lingen. There's no means of saving him. He'll die under the knife."

"That's what he wants, Professor."

"What—what he wants?" Brosius stammered helplessly. "And you're prepared to help him on his way?"

"It's the last service I can do for him. There are things that bind me and Merckel together which you don't know about, Professor. If I had died in a bunker in Cologne, and was still lucid, I'd have liked to have Merckel come and read the Bible to me. Not so much with God in mind, as because I'd have lied easier for knowing this life wasn't really much loss. But now it's the other way around, and Merckel looks to me for help. You know the miseries of death from cirrhosis of the liver. The hemorrhaging of his varices will make it easier for him to die with dignity, under anesthetic."

"Lingen, what you're doing is crazy!" said Brosius quietly. "I ought to restrain you."

"Then Kruger will operate."

"You'll be struck off the register."

"If I do nothing, he'll be in a coma in two hours' time, and in three hours he'll be dead. He prayed for me with his rosary; I must pray for him with my knife."

"You're mad!" shouted Brosius.

"You're finding excuses for me, Professor! I'm afraid I must now leave you to the world of normality." And he walked into the operating theater. Its doors closed silently behind him.

My God, I could do with a cognac, thought Brosius, feeling his nerves on edge. A double!

But he stayed outside the operating theater, sitting on a swivel chair, waiting to know what was happening behind those soundproofed doors.

"You're a true friend, doctor! Come here a moment, will you?" Father Merckel was lying on the operating table, still conscious. The nurses and doctors were standing by, not quite sure what was about to happen. Lingen bent over the priest, smiling into his wrinkled, yellowish face. "You shouldn't speak so freely of friends, Father. You know none of us have many real friends, from time to time we come closer to one another, that's all."

"And as for time, mine's run out, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for being so honest. If you didn't operate, how much longer?"

"Perhaps two hours, and then you'd lose consciousness."

"Two hours," Father Merckel looked at the white ceiling of the operating theater, the huge operating lamps, not yet switched on. "That's too long, doctor. Two hours waiting to appear before the Judgement Seat—it's like two thousand years!" Merckel took a deep breath, had to swallow, coughed and spat blood. Lingen mopped his chin and chest, and laid his cool hand soothingly on the priest's sweating forehead.

"I'm afraid of those two hours!" gasped Merckel, with difficulty.

"You mustn't talk so much, Father. You know that veins in your esophagus have ruptured, and you're bleeding internally?"

"Yes." Merckel grasped Lingen's hand; he managed to smile through a sudden new access of pain. "A priest, and I'm afraid even to spend my little remaining time repenting!" He turned his head to look at the team of doctors and nurses. "They look as if they'd like to get at my liver, Lingen."

"We'll put you under anesthetic in a moment."

"And then?"

"Then I am going to operate on your throat. If necessary I shall perform a thoracotomy."

"What for? I can't be saved now."

Lingen glanced briefly at Dr. Kruger. The nurse wheeled up the cart of instruments, a blood tranfusion apparatus was brought up from another corner of the room (Merckel's blood group had been determined in the laboratory while he was prepared for the operation). Intravenous anesthetics are not given to patients with liver disorders or for operations on the throat, so Dr. Lingen had decided on oxygen gas anesthesia. While the nurse injected curare to lower muscle tone, two doctors wheeled up the big anesthetic apparatus, equipped with an automatic respirator. The nurse had the catheter ready; Father Merckel would inhale the mixture of gases through this catheter inserted into his trachea. He looked at the apparatus with raised eyebrows.

"So much trouble for a tired, drunk old man!" he said. "Oh, send your people away, Lingen! Tell them to go and have a drink on me instead!"

Lingen laughed, patting Merckel's bare shoulder. "It's not that easy, Father. A few months ago you told me where I was going wrong—in the same way you brought Peter back to normal life; the three of us have had our histories oddly intertwined! Even in the bunker of Cologne, I often thought of your words. Now it's my turn to try and help you, Father."

Lingen made a sign, and the anesthetists began their work. They bent over Merckel with the catheter. The priest looked defiantly at them. "Open your mouth," Lingen told him firmly.

Merckel nodded to one of the doctors. "I know that young man. You've taken communion from me, haven't you?"

"Yes, Father." The anesthetist took advantage of the moment to get Merckel's jaws wedged open. Merckel looked up at Dr. Lingen once more, a long and silent glance of farewell. He was praying to himself now as he stared at the ceiling.

"...forgive me my sins..."

Ten minutes later, Konrad Lingen was making a long incision in Father Merckel's neck. It was his first operation on a human being for months.

Professor Brosius waited outside the operating theater for an hour, sitting on the vinyl-covered chair, aware that he was standing on the sidelines to witness either the return of the famous Lingen to surgery, or his complete collapse.

He tried quite hard to hope for the latter alternative, but somehow he found himself wishing for Lingen to succeed. A male nurse had brought him a bottle of cognac, and Brosius sipped slowly from a glass. He felt it doing him good. There's a lot a nonsense written about alcohol abuse, he thought. He had spent much of his working life with alcoholics, people with delirium tremens, psychopaths suffering from hallucinations, and he knew how narrow the boundary is between pleasant refreshment and destructive intoxication. A drink can revive one, thought Brosius—look at me, I'm using this cognac to calm myself. A cheerful social event isn't quite the same without a glass in your hand. But an alcoholic is a different matter: a sick man, or so we think today, born with a predisposition to drink—a dormant sickness which will break out some day, as mysterious and shattering as schizophrenia or a psychosis.

Was Lingen a real alcoholic? Brosius shook his head. No, he answered himself. He's operating again behind those soundproofed doors; a man who drinks out of despair can be cured, all he has done is flee from reality to illusion, to numb himself. Peter was not a real alcoholic either. He, too, wanted to escape.

What about Father Merckel? Brosius poured another cognac. A borderline case, he thought. The tragic proof that there's no going back. He knew himself, and preserved that knowledge in alcohol. He epitomizes the tragedy of weakness, though he looked strong as a bear.

After an hour the doors of the operating theater opened, and a figure covered with white sheets was wheeled out. Brosius jumped up. "Is—is he dead?" he asked.

"No, he's alive," said the nurse wheeling the stretcher along.

"But that's impossible!" Brosius ran to Dr. Lingen, who was just coming out of the theater. "Is he really alive? How did you do it, Lingen?"

"I don't know." Lingen watched the stretcher disappear into the big elevator. "I really do not know. My hands did my work, that's all."

"You haven't really saved him, though."

"No. He'll live a few weeks, then his liver will fail in any case."

"Lingen!" Professor Brosius seized his exhausted colleague by his coat. "You were going to help Merckel to die—under anesthetic."

"Yes." Lingen nodded. "But then I found I couldn't do it. After the first incision, when I got to the perforated varices—I suppose I've always been a fighter, and I couldn't let Merckel go without a fight. No, I didn't do what he wanted—but damn it, Professor, I am a doctor!"

Wordlessly, Professor Brosius pressed Lingen's hand and turned away, ashamed and sobered by the realization that he had been opposing a greater man than himself.

Down in the reception area, a young male nurse from the State Mental Hospital was waiting for him. He was pacing frantically up and down. When he saw the professor coming downstairs he ran to meet him.

"Professor!" he shouted. "You must come at once! I've been trying to reach you for an hour, but they wouldn't phone the operating theater, they wouldn't even send a messenger. You must come at once!"

"What on earth is the matter?" Brosius looked around; they were alone. "What's all this about, Peterson?"

"There's been a—well, a riot. In Ward 70. They've barricaded themselves in with beds and lockers, they've got Nurse Heimann in there as a hostage and they're demanding ten bottles of schnapps in exchange or—or they say they'll castrate him."

"Call the police!" Brosius was purple with rage. A riot in the alcoholics' wing of the State Mental Hospital! Such a thing had not happened since four drunks assaulted a doctor forty years ago.

"The police?" Nurse Petersen hesitated. "I suppose we'll have to, but they do have Heimann in there, sir, and they'll carry out their threat. You know that bunch!"

"For God's sake, they can't be given schnapps!" shouted Brosius.

"That's why you must come at once, Professor."

"What's Kellermann doing?"

"Judo Fritz—well, he's sitting outside the door trying to negotiate. He's offered them five bottles."

"And?" asked Brosius grimly.

"They say ten! They say if they only get five they'll cut off just one of Heimann's balls! Heimann's spoken to Fritz himself. Those swine have got his clothes off and tied him to the table, with ripped-up towels, and shown him two knives—they made them out of tin spoons, sharpened them up!"

"We'd better go," said Professor Brosius hoarsely.

When they reached the hospital, two police cars were in fact already pulled up outside, and the policemen were hanging around the forecourt waiting. Upstairs, at the window of Ward 70, Wing 3, distorted faces were glued to the barred frames. The patients were spitting, yelling and screaming abuse at the policemen. Behind them, all hell seemed to have been let loose. Brosius heard shouts and screams ringing right through the building. Four doctors were waiting for him at the door, looking helpless.

"They've broken the whole place up!" one of the doctors told him. "They've even torn the washbasins away from the walls—there's water pouring out of the pipes, coming through the ceiling of the floor below. I think we should send in the police with tear gas."

"Don't be ridiculous." Professor Brosius looked up at the window of Ward 70. One of the alcoholics stuck out his tongue, climbing on the window sill. "Hi, Prof!" he shouted, his voice cracking. "Hello, dearie!"

There was more yelling inside the room, hands grasped the man and pulled him back from the window.

Then another car pulled up outside the building. Dr. Lingen, in his white coat, got out.

"What are you doing here?" asked Brosius, surprised.

"I received a phone call; I heard you've got trouble here. Look, if you'd let me talk to them before you send in the police. . . ."

"Talk? To those brutes?"

"Yes, talk to them—as one alcoholic to another." Dr. Lingen's smile was rather strained. "I do know something about it, you see."

"Very well!" Stiffly, Brosius indicated the entrance. "But you'll only get laughed at for your pains!"

16

Calm and massive, Judo Fritz was sitting outside the barricaded door of Ward 70, smoking. He was surrounded by debris: bits of bedsteads, mattresses, torn pillows, battered tin cups and plates. Water was running under the door and out into the corridor: just a trickle at present, but when the shouting momentarily died down inside the room the rush of water pouring out of the pipes could be heard, and the sound of feet splashing through puddles, with shouting and laughing as one man sprayed water at another.

Professor Brosius and Dr. Lingen did not stop to hear Fritz's account of the affair. Lingen went straight up to the door and hammered on it.

"Shut up!" someone inside shouted. "We'll tear Heimann's balls off if you break down that door."

"Who's their leader?" asked Lingen, looking around. Judo Fritz, still smoking, had given up his chair to Brosius. "Not sure," he said, "but we did have this new bloke brought in, day before yesterday. Picked up by the Ruhr, pissed as a newt, lying in the grass singing dirty songs. No fixed abode, a real down-and-out. He's most likely the boss. Not so young, either—white hair and that."

Lingen nodded, turning back to the door. It was quiet inside Ward 70 now, except for the sound of the water. Lingen tapped quite quietly at the door, and a hoarse voice inside asked, "Who's that? Cops?"

"No, certainly not."

"Here, I've heard your voice before!"

"Then open the door and let's have a look at each other."

There was much whispering and consultation inside the room. "Listen," said the same voice, "I'll just open the door a crack, but you try forcing your way in and Heimann gets his balls cut off right away. There's three men beside him, with the knives. So watch your step, understand?"

"Perfectly." Dr. Lingen signed to Judo Fritz to step back. They heard furniture being moved aside, someone cursed heartily, then the door was opened just a crack. Water shot out into the corridor, washing around the professor's shoes, which he hastily drew up.

A face appeared in the doorway, or rather the nightmare likeness of a face. A head which looked as if it had been crushed in a press, broad, thick lips, bulging eyes, short white hair, like bleached moss. The face of a giant carp.

Its rolling eyes stared at Dr. Lingen. The fish mouth gaped open.

"It's our doc . . ." stammered the man.

"Emil!" Dr. Lingen's voice was quite calm; he was doing his best not to show any surprise. "Well, hello, Emil. What's all this about?"

"Who is this Emil?" Brosius asked, in the background.

"An old friend of mine, Professor," Lingen glanced quickly around. Emil the Fish had opened the door rather wider, and Judo Fritz could see into the wrecked room. The male nurse, Heimann, was lying tied to the table, naked but still unharmed, though three men with sharpened tin knives stood by him.

"A friend of yours?" asked Brosius. "Him?"

"Emil's an excellent fellow, so long as you don't cross him."

"Yes, we can see that!"

"We've been in a bunker together, lying on the damp concrete floor with only a thin blanket under us, drinking vermouth, haven't we, Emil? With the Countess beside us, giving herself a fix in the thigh four times a day. Remember when the cops raided us, and Jim the Donkey's funeral?"

Emil the Fish nodded. "The Countess, she's dead, too," he said, in a subdued voice.

"Dead?"

"She jumped off the Hohenzollern Bridge into the Rhine. She really loved you, doc, you know that?"

"What Countess?" asked Brosius, sitting on his chair surrounded by water.

"She was my mistress, in the underworld of Cologne." Dr. Lingen shook his head as he looked into Brosius's horrified eyes. "No, you'd never understand, Professor. You've been dealing with drunks for thirty years, but here in your well-run, clean hospital. You don't know what it's like out in the cellars and gutters, in the bunkers, under the bridges, in the hostels and asylums. But I do; I've lived with them and drunk with them, and I did learn the painful art of honesty there. Because in the places where that man comes from—" and he pointed to Emil's fishlike face—"only honesty will do. The down-and-out derelicts don't trick one another, they stick together."

He turned back to the door. "Can I come in, Emil?" he asked.

"Sure, Doc, you can come in. But not the rest of that bunch out there."

"It's all right, they don't want to."

Emil stepped back, and turned to the three men beside the bound and naked male nurse. "Okay, let Heimann go. This is a friend of mine."

"He's another of 'em. Look at his white coat!" someone shouted.

"Shut your trap!" Emil picked a chair out of the tangle of broken furniture, dusted it off with his sleeve and set it upright on the wet floor. "Sit down, doc."

"Thank you, Emil." Dr. Lingen sat down. The water instantly ran into his shoes, swelling the leather; he took off both shoes and socks and flung them into a corner, letting his bare feet dangle in the water. The men around were gaping at him as if he were some fabulous animal. Emil the Fish was breathing with a whistling sound; he was an asthmatic.

"Now, what's it all about, Emil?" Lingen asked gently. "Tearing out basins, acting like wild animals, threatening to castrate the nurse—suppose you'd acted like this in the bunker? We wouldn't have stood for it there."

"I can't stand it here, doc. I want out!" Emil perched on the edge of the table. "I mean, is there a law says you can't lie in a field and sing? So why shouldn't I drink? I'm only harming myself, right? But they shut me up here in the nut house—well, that did it. Injustice, that's what I can't stand."

"You've got a point there, Emil."

"Hear that?" shouted Emil the Fish. "My friend the doc says I'm right!" The others applauded loudly, except for one who

shouted, "It's all lies! Just one of their tricks. He's trying to get us drunk on words, but we want a real drink—Christ, am I thirsty!"

"Emil—*would* you have stood for that sort of thing in the bunker?" Lingen asked.

Emil's lower lip protruded; then he nodded silently, made his way across the wet floor to the speaker and, with one mighty blow, swept him into the corner. The man sank into the water and remained there on his knees, blood running from his nose, and suddenly burst into a fit of tears.

Emil the Fish came back to Lingen. "Right, that's it with him, doc." The rushing of the water from the pipes stopped too; finally, someone had turned off the mains downstairs. "Can we talk now?"

"Yes of course, Emil. What about?"

"Getting me out of here!"

"Emil, that's not for me to decide." Lingen took his bare feet out of the water; they were freezing. "You've been a fool, you know that? If you'd just kept quiet they'd have let you out in a couple of months. Now they'll let you stew in your own juice."

Emil hung his head, as the misery of his situation dawned fully on him. He looked at Heimann, the male nurse, still tied naked to the table. He dared not think what would have happened if he had actually been castrated—he might have bled to death, that would have been murder! Himself, Emil, a murderer! He hunched his shoulders, shivering. He seemed to have returned from some other, dreadful world. His real nature was primitive, but gentle, patient and friendly, with no place in it for thoughts of murder.

"So now what, doc?" he asked pitifully.

"You're in rather a mess, Emil." Lingen patted the man's shaking shoulders. "It'll take some time to correct it."

"Yes, doc, I know," Emil had tears in his protuberant, bloodshot eyes. The other inmates of Ward 70 stood motionless. They had sobered down by now, and were thinking along much the same lines as Emil, who put their fears into words.

"Are you handing us over to that great ape?"

"Who do you mean?"

"Judo Fritz."

"He's your nurse, Emil."

"Well, he'll cripple us for life if he gets at us. You don't

know what goes on in here, doc. A couple of guys beaten up every day, and..."

"Listen. I promise you Fritz will not take it out on you. But you'll have to work, too."

"Work?"

"Well, who do you think will pay for all this damage? You could find you're left in here a year, or longer. You might have thought of that before."

"And—and if we'd really... I mean, Heimann?" someone asked.

"Well, what good would that have done you?" Lingen smiled, his tone very down-to-earth. "They could have gotten five characters like Judo Fritz to come and take you apart."

"That's right." Emil the Fish nodded. "I know the doc—he's right." He indicated the table where the naked Heimann was still lying. "Untie him. It wasn't such a great idea after all—better be glad Fritz won't have a free hand with us. My friend the doc has given me his word!"

"Yes, indeed I have, Emil."

They untied Heimann and pushed him out into the corridor, where he fainted into Fritz's arms in reaction to the horrors of the last few hours. Professor Brosius went to the door and looked at the battle area inside.

"What's happening, Dr. Lingen?"

"You can come in, Professor." Lingen put his arm around Emil the Fish, who was sobbing noisily. A year, Emil was thinking, a whole year here in the bin! I'll never survive. Life is just shit—Jutta, now, she had the right idea, off the bridge into the river, and that was that.

Professor Brosius looked all the way around the room, his face working, but Lingen raised a hand. "No sermons, please, Professor. They're going to behave well and get down to work. They've let off steam, the valve's closed again—well, you're a psychiatrist, I don't need to tell you anything about that..."

Brosius nodded, several times. "Thank you, Lingen," he said quietly. "I don't like to think what might have happened here, if you hadn't been an alcoholic once yourself..."

"You mean he isn't now?" asked Emil the Fish.

"No, Emil." Lingen patted his shoulder. "I'm cured. Don't look so surprised. Such things can happen." He put his arm around Emil, who had begun to sob, and led him out of the flooded room. Judo Fritz was waiting in the corridor. His huge

hands were spread out, ready.

"Keep your hands to yourself!" Lingen snapped. "And that goes for everyone else in there too. If I hear a complaint, Kellermann, one single complaint . . ."

"This isn't any private clinic, doctor, this is the State Mental Hospital," Fritz growled.

"And these are human beings like you and me."

Brosius came out of Ward 70, with its inmates docilely following him. "We're going to start cleaning up," he told the speechless Fritz. "Take your shoes off, Kellermann, and we'll all wade in together." And he sat down on the chair to remove his own shoes and socks. Professor Brosius in person rolled up his trouser legs and waded back into the wrecked ward. With the aid of two patients, he started dragging a broken bed out.

Got to set an example, he thought. I do really believe Lingen is some kind of genius! In war or peace, men will follow a good example!

And suddenly, while carrying a broken chair through the water, he understood fully the aims of Alcoholics Anonymous. Take them along with you, he thought, give them an example, show them the way back to a life they thought they'd lost forever. Better therapy than any course of drug treatment.

Powerful engines revved up outside the building. The police were leaving.

Three weeks later, Father Hans Merckel died in his room in the Lingen Clinic. He was fully conscious until the end, and Peter and Susanne were with him. Despite the blood transfusions, Merckel's body was poisoned beyond redemption, and his liver had completely stopped functioning. He could no longer speak, but his hands were still strong enough for him to write in chalk on a large school slate.

"Where is Lingen?" he wrote. "I should like to see him."

"Dr. Lingen's busy, Father." Peter bent down to the dying man. "He's helping Professor Brosius at the State Mental Hospital."

"What about you?" wrote Merckel.

"I wanted to be here with you, Father," said Kaul. "I'm not too sure I remember how to pray, but I'd like to pray with you now."

Merckel took the slate, wiped it clean, and wrote, "Our whole life is a prayer, only we don't know it. We may think

we have left God, but that too is an illusion. God is always with us. Amen."

"Amen," said Peter, quietly.

And Merckel suddenly remembered a young soldier: he could even remember the lad's name, Felix Blattner. A tall, hulking farmer's son, whom he had met in Gumrak, as men came out of the hell that was Stalingrad; the boy's nose, one ear and one eye had been blown away, and he lay in a cattle truck. "Father," Felix Blattner had said, when Merckel, going from truck to truck, came to him, "do you want to pray with me?" So Merckel had replied, "Yes, my son, if you like."

"It isn't that, Father." Felix Blattner's one remaining eye had looked at him, pleading. "But if you had a schnapps—just a sip, Father."

Hans Merckel did have a schnapps. He had unscrewed his hip flask, held it to the boy's twitching mouth, seen him swallow three times and then die, happy to have gone to that better world which had always been promised him with three mouthfuls of schnapps inside of him.

Father Merckel drew the slate toward him, wiped it clean again, and wrote, in large, imperious characters, "I want a glass of schnapps!"

When Peter held the slate so that everyone could see the request, Dr. Kruger, standing tactfully in the background with a nurse, shook his head. Kaul said, "Father, we can't. Anyway, there isn't any here."

Merckel wrote, "Don't lie to me in the face of death! Let him who is without sin cast the first stone. Even a murderer is allowed one last wish—am I less than a murderer?"

Without a word, Peter Kaul left the room. Ten minutes later he returned with a small pocket flask of spirits. Merckel's dull eyes began to glow, his hands went out. Dr. Kruger moved toward the bed, then bowed his head and retreated again. Slowly, Kaul took the top off the bottle, filled a small drinking cup, and gave the bottle back to Susanne, who placed it on the table. Oh, thought Hans Merckel, how well I understand you, Felix Blattner! I may not be rotting in thirty degrees of frost in a cattle truck in Gumrak, but like you I fear dying, I fear God even more. I am afraid, that's all.

He raised his head. Peter supported his neck and put the cup to his lips. Merckel drank greedily, and the spirit burned as it went down to the wound in his throat, the pain of it turning his brain to a fiery volcano. He groaned out loud. "Oh!" Quite

clearly and distinctly. Then he fell back into Kaul's arms. He felt as if his heart and brain were being torn out, everything in him was burning. So purgatory does exist, he thought. Lord, be merciful unto me, a sinner...

Dr. Kruger bent over the dead man, closing his eyes. Susanne took Merckel's hands and folded them together. Slowly, Peter screwed the top back on the flask, and Dr. Kruger drew the sheet up over the dead man's massive head. Father Hans Merckel was finally at peace.

Another letter had come from Dr. Hutli, of the Clinica Santa Barbara. It arrived on the day Susanne went into the maternity hospital to give birth to her fourth child. Her contractions had begun during the night, but she let Peter go on sleeping until they were coming at five minute intervals, and she could not wait any longer. An ambulance took them both to the hospital, while a woman neighbor came over to look after the children.

"It may be some time," said the doctor in the maternity hospital, after examining Susanne. "Your fourth, you said? Ah, well, then you know all about it—and your wife has a rather narrow pelvis, but a fourth won't stick if three have made their way out already!"

Presumably a medical joke. Peter thanked the doctor, and went back home to spend the rest of the night dozing fitfully on the old sofa in the kitchen. Dr. Hutli's letter came with the mail. He wrote: "I am delighted to have good news of Gundi for you. She is doing very well, has put on four pounds, and is a most charming, friendly child. We had our first major success with her treatment yesterday; as you know, Gundi could already stand on her own for several minutes, but yesterday, supported by a baby-walker device, she took three steps. We are practicing daily, and she seems to enjoy it a good deal."

She's walking, thought Peter, reading the brief letter over and over again. She won't be just a poor crawling animal, she'll be a human being like the rest of us. She may be a bit slow, simple, childlike—but she'll be able to walk, holding my hand. She'll understand something of the world around her, hear the birds sing, see the flowers in bloom!

He folded up the letter, got his old bicycle out of the basement and rode off to the maternity hospital again. On his way, he passed the empty rectory of St. Christopher's. The new young priest had not been inducted yet. He saw Father

Merckel's housekeeper, wearing deep mourning like a widow, busily cleaning the windows.

He called at the cemetery before going on to the hospital, and visited Merckel's grave: a fresh mound, the wreaths and bouquets on it scarcely withered. Many distinguished local figures, among them Dr. Lingen and Professor Brosius, had attended the funeral, along with Merckel's whole congregation. The bishop had come to give the blessing; he was one of the few who knew the secret which was lowered into the narrow grave with the priest's coffin.

"Thank you, Father," Peter said quietly, at the graveside, folding his hands. "Gundi will be able to walk, and that's your doing. If only you could have lived to know it!"

At the maternity hospital, the nurse in the labor ward came to meet Peter with outstretched hands. "Congratulations!" she said, before he could utter a word. "A boy—seven pounds, strong and healthy. Arrived just ten minutes ago!"

A high, quavering cry rang out from a nearby room. Susanne was still in the labor ward being stitched up..

"Is that him?" asked Peter.

"Yes—in good voice, isn't he?"

Kaul nodded silently. She said he was healthy—that was all he could take in at first. He swallowed once or twice, then looked at the smiling young nurse. "Perfectly healthy?" he asked. "You're sure? Nothing wrong with his arms or legs—he doesn't look like a mongoloid or anything?"

"No, why should he? He's a very find baby indeed!"

"Why should he? Oh, nurse, what a question!" Peter leaned back against the wall, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

"You can see your son in half an hour, Mr. Kaul."

"Oh, thank you. And my wife?"

"Sooner than that, maybe. Would you wait in Room 168? That's on the second floor; you can use the elevator over there." She smiled at him.

Kaul nodded, and walked toward the elevator.

It's all over, he thought happily. We're a big, ordinary, happy family again. Eight hours' work, a couple of hours' overtime in the evening if I feel like it, then time to read the paper, watch television, have a sandwich and a bottle of beer—yes, I could even allow myself a bottle of beer! That needn't mean a relapse. Some day we'll buy a little car and go out to the country on Sundays, get some fresh air, enjoy a picnic in

the woods, hear the cuckoo. You're supposed to make a wish when you hear the cuckoo. What shall we wish for? Happiness? Money? Good health? A little house of our own? Long life? Good, well-behaved children?

Peter stopped, looking at the door of the elevator, a glass door reinforced with wire netting. Behind it, a shadow was sliding silently down.

Just to stay on top, thought Kaul. That's what we shall wish for. Never to go down into the dark again. To stay up in the sun and feel its warmth.

A nurse passed him, stopped, looked around and came back.

"Did you want to use the elevator?"

"Yes, nurse."

"Well, you must push the red button, you see, or it won't stop."

"Thank you, nurse!" He smiled, raised his hand, put out his forefinger and pushed the red button beside the elevator door. The nurse hurried off.

Life should have a red button, too, he thought. A button you can press so it won't pass you by without stopping for you. But life isn't so simple, you have to make the effort to run after it.

The elevator stopped in front of him on its way up again, and the door slid open.

In you go, Peter. Room 168 on the second floor.

A woman and a child are waiting for you. Love is waiting, and the promise of a happy life.

Kaul got in, the door closed, and as he went up he felt he was floating to the sky.

Only a truly happy man can feel like that.

And Peter Kaul was happy.

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ISBN 0-515-05677-4

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

P3-DXK-608